

## **WHAT DID JESUS SAY? PART 5 ABOUT HELL**

**“Hell? Yes!”**

**Dr. John Allan Lavender**

**Luke 16:19-26**

There can be no mistake about it then . . . Jesus believed in hell. And, while I would be willing to pay almost any price to say, “It isn't so. The whole world will eventually be saved”... I cannot argue my way around the unmistakable and inescapable teachings of Jesus regarding the future of those who reject the love of God.

I was counseling with a young man not too long ago and in the course of our conversation he said, “I hate the very thought of hell.” And I had to answer, “So do I!” I hate the devil and sin for having made it necessary. But all of my hatred cannot argue the devil and sin out of existence.

I hate the thought of prison and the gas chamber. I hate the thought of adultery and lust. I hate the thought of bigotry and race prejudice. I hate the thought of violence and murder. I hate the thought of all the loathsome qualities in man's nature. But the fact that I hate the thought of them does not deny their reality.

And even though I detest the doctrine of hell from the bottom of my heart because I am aware of the damaging effect a belief in hell has upon some people, I am also aware of the horrific tragedies that occur because a large part of our world does not believe in hell at all. And therefore, even though it is an unpleasant task for me personally, it seems imperative that we take a hard, long stare at the teachings of Jesus regarding hell.

I believe one reason for our repugnance is the hideous and horrible distortion of the *doctrine* of hell which comes to us from certain segments of the church.

In one of his books William Edward Biederwolf points out, “Every heathen religion has its hell and in the past it seemed as though the human mind could not satisfy itself with anything less than

the most grotesque types of punishment imaginable.”

At one point he describes the old Jewish conception of hell as it is given in the Talmud. “There are seven abodes in hell, and in each of these abodes there are 7000 Caverns and in each of these caverns there are 7,000 clefts and in each cleft there are 7000 scorpions and each scorpion has 7000 limbs and each limb has 7,000 barrels of gall, and you can imagine how they use this wonderful machinery to torture the damned. Seven rivers of such rank poison run through this hell that if one should touch one drop of water he would immediately burst.”

When it comes to the Christian concept of hell we must be controlled by the word of God. But, as Biederwolf points out, even so some of the ancient Christian writers and preachers seemed to feel called upon to produce a hell that could beat the heathen hell all hollow.

They seized upon certain expressions like those of Jesus where he says, “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” And where he speaks of a “furnace of fire” and a “lake which burns with fire and brimstone.” And, with a Titanic rigidity of literal interpretation they pictured a hell too horrible to think about, much less described.

“Put your finger in a candle,” said John Wesley. “Can you bear it for one minute? How then would you bear to have your whole body plunged into a lake of fire burning with brimstone?”

Charles Finney spoke of waves of rolling fire into which lost sinners are thrown, “Who lash out at its burning shores and gnaw their tongues for pain.”

Even pious Thomas A. Kempis pictures the miser with melted gold being poured down his throat. As for Jonathan Edwards, no wonder people fainted when he preached his sermon on Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God. He pictured a hell where every spot was hotter than the other and he spoke of “vast billows of fire rolling over the sinner's head while his eyes and mouth and hands

and feet and loins and vitals are full of glowing, melting fire.”

Then to top it off, they added pictures of the meaning of eternity in such a place. One preacher described it in this way. “If the earth were a solid ball of steel and a dove pecked it once and then flew at its normal rate of speed to the moon which is 238,857 miles from earth and returned to peck this steel ball a second time, and continued these intermittent pecks and round trips to the moon... by the time the dove had pecked through the steel ball eternity would have just begun.”

And so, putting together a concept of eternity with a description of the hideous and horrible unquenchable fires of hell, certain segments of the church gave us a description of "the penitentiary of the damned" that not only offends our intelligence by its literal crudity, but is utterly out of character with the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Well then, if these misconceptions are relic's of medieval superstition and should be tossed upon the scrap heap of forgotten fallacies, what is hell? Why is it necessary? Who are its inhabitants? How did they get there?

### **Why?**

I do not propose this morning to make hell palatable, for it is a place to be shunned with all of the energy of our being. But I do think it is possible to show hell as both reasonable and moral.

There is a law of physics which state that: For every action there is a contrary or equal re-action. For instance, if I take a piece of elastic and stretch it for one inch, it will react with a force equal to one inch. If I stretch it six inches, it will react with a force equal to six inches.

Now, as we learned a few weeks ago, sin is an action. It is a deliberate, willful action by which we rule God out of our lives. The inevitable consequence of that action called sin is the inevitable re-action called punishment. And the severity of the re-action... punishment... is equal to the

force of the action... sin.

Sometimes we hear people say, “It isn't fair to punish a soul for all eternity because of the sin committed in a limited span of time.” But to argue in that way is to admit too cheap a view of sin. The basis of punishment is the severity of a crime and not the length of time it takes to commit it.

It is possible to murder a man in a moment... but we don't give a murderer a shorter sentence than we do an embezzler, like Orville Hodge, who took several years to bilk the people of Illinois out of millions.

As a matter fact, a murderer is often given a death sentence for a single crime, while a man who is guilty of many infractions of the law over an extended period of time may even be given a suspended sentence. Why? Because the very nature of the crime of murder is evidence of a total disregard for the dignity and worth of human personality.

I think that explains why a good man (in the eyes of society) like Dives, who with a sense of pride in his own accomplishment ruled God and the love of God out of his life, was condemned to hell...while a bad man (in the eyes of society) like Lazarus, who being a beggar had undoubtedly stolen and probably lied many times, became a citizen of Paradise.

Lazarus was guilty of misdemeanors. Being a product of the ignorance and injustice of his society he was probably more sinned against than sinning. But Dives was guilty of the greatest crime of all: living as if there is no God. And it was the severity of his sin and not the length of time it took to commit it that determined the punishment.

Hell, then, is the inevitable consequence of sin. Fulton J. Sheen puts it this way: “Hell is not related to an evil life as a spanking is related to an act of disobedience. For such a punishment need not follow the act. Rather, hell is bound up with an evil life in precisely the same way as blindness is related to the plucking out of an eye. If I lose my eye, I am blinded necessarily and if

I rebel against God, refuse his pardon and die in sin, I must suffer hell as a consequence.”

Furthermore, the whole concept of justice demands the reality of hell. If there is no hell, then this is not a moral universe. Calvary loses its meaning and sending Christ to suffer, bleed and die becomes a useless, senseless, even monstrous act on the part of God.

If there is no hell, then the inevitable conclusion is that the good, the bad and the indifferent shall spend eternity together. But we cannot conceive of such a thing. A holy God who is tolerant of evil is a contradiction of terms. To give the sinner and his sin a permanent place in Paradise so he can go on forever in his rebellion, would be to turn heaven into hell. And this can never be.

Hell is necessary for another reason: If man is to be free to choose there must be alternatives from which he can make his choice.

If a game is to be played, it must be possible to lose it. And when God gave man the gift of freedom — a gift which lifted man above the brutes and made him like God — God accepted the inevitable result: All of his divine labor aimed at redeeming the world would not succeed in every case. In the words of Jesus, “This is the condemnation: light came into the world and men love darkness rather than light.” There are some people who simply will not be redeemed. They are determined to remain as they are.

When a man lives in darkness he is simply doing what he prefers to do. And therefore the consequence of hell is not something which is imposed upon him...rather it is the natural result of his own desire. He has his wish! He chooses to live his life as if there is no God. He prefers darkness to light. He is, in the words of C. S. Lewis, willing “to make the best of what he finds there. And what he finds there is hell.”

As one of the old theological primers puts it, “Hell is the monumental expression of the abuse of

human freedom. This is the key to its meaning. This alone explains it.”

### **What?**

Let's put it this way. Hell is *a state of being*. A state in which self-consciousness, memory, recognition and reality remain. A state in which love, mercy, hope, happiness and peace are forever absent. We hear people say, “It's hot as hell.” “It's cold is hell.” “It's raining like hell.” And they are absolutely right. That is a perfect description of hell. It is always as hot as... as cold as... as wet as... for according to Jesus, hell is unspeakably horrible.

Whatever you make of the language of Jesus — and Von Hugel warns us not to confuse the *doctrine* of hell with the imagery by which it may be conveyed — whatever you make of the *language* of Jesus remember that “symbols are the flock shadows of reality.” And the expressions of Jesus: “punishment,” “destruction,” “lake of fire,” “outer darkness,” are intended to warn us of *realities* that make hell a place of terrible torment. Not necessarily the physical torment of physical fire as we know it. But certainly the greater *spiritual* torment of a burning conscience, a searing memory and the eternal knowledge of what might have been.

What is hell like? It is a very opposite of God. We read that God is light, therefore hell is darkness. We know the God is love, therefore hell is hate. We know that God is Holy, therefore hell is evil. God is gracious... hell is wretched. God is creative... hell is destructive. God is truth... hell is error. God is peace... hell is torment. God is gentle... hell is furious. God is life... hell is death.

And because hell is the consequence of sin, it will endure as long as sin endures. If sin is eternal, then hell is eternal.

The same Greek word used to describe the eternal nature of God is also used by Jesus to describe life after death. He said, “The righteous shall go away into '*aeonian*' life, and the wicked the shall

enter into '*aeonian*' death.” If it is eternal in the case of the righteous, it is eternal in the case of the wicked.

Apparently Jesus knew that a sinner confirmed in his sin will go on sinning forever. Therefore, the consequence of his sin must of necessity keep pace with his rebellion. And since all the love of God could do in *this* world would not cause a rebellious soul to forsake his sin, there's nothing left for God to do *after* death that might redeem him.

I said in my introduction I would be willing to pay “any price” to remove the *doctrine* of hell. I'm afraid I spoke too glibly. For I could not possibly pay one centillionth a part of the price God has already paid to remove the *reality* of hell. And that is the tragedy about it all. So much love. So much mercy. So much compassion. And still people reject God, turn their face away from him and tread resolutely on toward hell.

They willfully separate themselves from all that is God and good. And that's what hell really is. Hell is separation. Separation from God. Here and hereafter.

There is nothing more disastrous and tragic than that. Do remember Jesus' parable of the vine and the branches? He said that if a branch is cut off it soon dies because it is separated from the source of life. Life comes only from life. And to be separated from God is to be separated from the life of all living. No wonder then that Paul, caught up in the wonder of a salvation so great as that which is ours in Christ, burst forth with this magnificent line... “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This is the miracle of redemption. The great chasm between God and man is breached. They are no longer worlds apart. They are no longer separated. They are one.

But what if a man simply will not receive Christ? What if he insists on remaining apart from God? What if he is still determined to keep the chasm between them? Then there is no alternative. God must take him at his word. He is given his wish. He is given hell. He is separated from God. Not just part-time, but for eternity.

### **Who?**

And so, you see, the citizens of hell are people who *choose* to be there. They are there by choice. There is profound truth in C.S. Lewis' observation that “Hell is hell, not from its own point of view, but from heaven's point of view.”

To those of us who have known the goodness and grace of God, even the *thought* of hell is unendurable. But to those who love self more than God... who refuse to abdicate the throne of pride... who habitually reject all of God's overtures of love... to them, the thought of spending eternity in heaven *with* God is unendurable. And so, “Hell is hell, not from its own point of view, but from heaven's point of view.” Those who live there *are* there, not by coercion but by choice.

Someone has said, “Hell is the home of incurables. The disease that is beyond cure is their egoism. It is incurable because they have everlastingly rejected the only remedy that could heal them: the love of someone other than themselves.”

Somewhere I read the story of a man who had a dream in which he was given a glimpse of the after-life. His first visit was to hell. There he saw a sumptuous banquet table filled with all manner of “scrumptious” food. It was a gourmet’s delight. Everything one could possibly want to tickle his palette was on the table.

But as he looked at the people sitting around the table, he discovered they were hollow-



cheeked, emaciated and on the verge of starvation. Then he noticed that bound to each of their arms was a spoon six feet long. No matter how hard they tried, they could not reach their mouth with the spoon. And so, in the presence of plenty, they were starving. And it was hell!

Then he visited heaven. He saw the same seemingly endless banquet table loaded down with all kinds of delightful foods. Here, too, was a gourmet's delight. And the people seated around the table also had six-foot spoons strapped to their arms. But instead of being hollow-cheeked, emaciated and starving, these people gave every evidence of glorious health. Their cheeks were rosy. Their faces were smiling. The room was filled with joyous laughter. Then the man noticed why. The people in the heaven were doing what the people in hell would never even think of doing. *They were using the six-foot spoons to feed each other.*

Who are the citizens of hell? They are people who refuse to really love anyone or anything except themselves. Oh, they may show a type of affection from time to time when they are assured of receiving something in return. But they never really love, for love is selfless. They suffer from a basic unwillingness to abandon self. And as a result, even as Jesus warned, by saving their life they lose it (Luke 17:38).

### **How?**

The final question to be answered then is how did they get there? In years gone by there have been many serious sermons describing the frantic, grasping, feverish efforts of people to keep from slipping into the yawning pit of hell. But, you see, no one ever slips into hell. They climb into hell! 2 Peter 3:9 tells us that “God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” With infinite love, patience, mercy and concern, God has set up numerous blockade's along the road to hell.

There is the blockade of a mother's prayers... of a preacher's sermon... of a teacher's lesson... of a Christian's witness... of a church's open door... of a little child's faith... of the Holy Spirit's

pleading... of God’s unlimited love in the giving of his son.

It is infinitely easier to go to heaven than it is to go to hell. For heaven is merely the acceptance of God’s free gift. But to get to hell you must climb over every single one of the blockades God has put in your path. And finally... at the very last... you must climb over the cross of Calvary itself.

Gypsy Smith used to tell the story of a nightclub in New York city called “The Gates of Hell.” It was just a few doors down the street from Calvary Church. One night a drunk came reeling down the street and asked a young man to show him the way to “The Gates of Hell.” The young man took him to the corner, pointed to the sign “Calvary Church” and said, “just go by Calvary and you will be at “he Gates of Hell.”

You see, my friend, it’s not possible to slip or fall into hell. There’s only one way to get there and that is to climb into hell. And those poor souls who spend eternity in that penitentiary of the damned are there because they succeeded in their rebellion... to the very end.

As C. S. Lewis so powerfully says: “The door of hell is locked on the inside.” That does not mean those who dwell therein do not *wish* to come out. But it is one thing to vaguely *wish* something. It is another thing to desperately *will* something. And what the citizens of hell do not *will* to do is to abandon themselves. They *did* not will to abandon self on earth and they *do* not will to abandon self in eternity. They are rebels to the end.

This morning I have not tried to paint a technicolor spectacular which would scare you out of your wits... but I hope with all my heart I have impressed you with the fact that hell is real. That it is a dreadful thing to be separated from God for time and for eternity. That there is no more serious business on earth than staying out of hell.

In that regard may I remind you that Jesus said, “Whosoever will may come and drink of the water of life freely.” “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” The citizens of hell are those who deliberately turn their back upon heaven. God granted you shall never be so foolish as to make so tragic a choice.