

**WHATEVER HAPPENED TO HELL?**  
***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, July 24, 2017***  
***based on Mark 9:43-48; II Thess. 1:5-12***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “The Hope of Heaven.” So far in this series we have established that we have solid reason to believe in heaven. We have considered what heaven is like, and how we have entrance into heaven through Jesus Christ. But if there is an afterlife, and the possibility of a wondrous destiny in heaven, is it also possible to have a not so wondrous destiny? If there is a heaven, is there also a hell? We will consider this question today, and what it means for Christian living in our time. Let us begin with a moment of prayer. . .

Some years ago, Martin Marty, a University of Chicago professor of church history who also became senior editor of the *Christian Century*, a top journal for pastors, was invited to deliver a lecture at Harvard University. The general subject was to be immortality; and Martin Marty decided, for whatever reason, to focus on the idea of hell. In preparation for the lecture, he began to look for scholarly articles on the subject. Of course there have been a lot of popular writings over the years about heaven and hell; but Martin Marty was looking for writings in the top scholarly journals. Using an index for those journals, he searched all the way back to 1889, and did not find a single entry on the subject of hell. He subsequently delivered a lecture entitled, “Hell Disappeared. No One Noticed.”

What Martin Marty observed was the broad cultural shift that has occurred over the years on the whole subject of hell. Go back a few centuries in Europe, and you’ll find a whole lot on hell—not only in books, but also in art. There are multiple paintings in cathedrals and museums depicting the torments that await the unredeemed. Emphasis on hell remained strong in the early years in America. One of the most famous sermons in the 18th century was one preached by Jonathan Edwards entitled, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in which he suggested that as a sinner you are like a spider or some other loathsome insect dangling by a thread over the pit of hell. The flames are leaping up around you, and it is only the mere mercy of God that keeps you this moment from falling in. People could almost feel the heat.

Now, however, one seldom hears about hell, and the idea has very much retreated from the popular imagination, which led Bertrand Russell to observe, “Hell is neither so certain nor as hot as it used to be.”

So whatever happened to hell? What exactly is the Biblical concept of hell, and what should we as Christians today be thinking about it?

The word “hell” never appears in the Old Testament. The King James Version of the Old Testament sometimes has the word “hell”, but that is a mistranslation of the Hebrew word Sheol, which, as we noted previously in this sermon series, was the early Israelite concept of where everyone was thought to go at death. Sheol was envisioned simply as a

misty realm where the dead have no real existence but are mere shadows—a realm not of torment but of nothingness. Early Israelites believed in neither heaven nor hell, no real afterlife at all, because they felt that God had not revealed anything more to them.

But in late Old Testament days, prophets began to get a vision that God would act to open up the way into life beyond death. This of course is what God would ultimately do through Jesus Christ, and so the New Testament would proclaim clearly that there is an afterlife. But if there is a conscious existence after death, it does not necessarily follow that the afterlife will be something wonderful. People today often want to imagine that after death they will of course float off into some sort of personal paradise. But an afterlife could end up being something terrible. Maybe you spend eternity in the Tower of Terror. I know—some of you who enjoy the Tower of Terror ride at Disney World might think that riding it forever would be great fun; but I'm thinking more of the Twilight Zone scenario that is the narrative in that ride, where a group of people become caught forever in a spooky, gloomy place. That of course is fiction; but it is interesting that over the centuries, as people in many places and times have pondered the idea of the afterlife, it has routinely occurred to people that the afterlife might not be fun, and there have been various dark visions of a most unpleasant underworld, such as the Greek idea of Hades. What basis do we have for thinking that an afterlife will be something good?

Biblical people of faith recognized that all good things come from God; and it is God alone who can grant us a bright future. Over time, prophets began to get the vision that for those who live in faithfulness to God and in righteousness, God will indeed create an afterlife that is a state of blessedness, a future that we call heaven. But what about those who turn from God and who engage in a life of wickedness? Their destiny may not be so rosy. So the book of Daniel, one of the latest Old Testament writings, proclaims, "Those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." (Daniel 12:2)

In the New Testament, the concept of the afterlife is fully developed. There is, on the one hand, an inspiring vision of heaven, which we have considered over the past few weeks. We have noted whenever the New Testament offers any sort of picture of heaven, that picture will have two key features—the picture is always God-centered, and it is highly symbolic. Biblical descriptions of heaven are God-centered because the essence of heaven, in the Biblical view, is that it is fellowship with God, for it is the connection with God that brings us into real life and fulfillment and joy. Biblical pictures of heaven are also symbolic because heaven really is beyond our comprehension, and all our earthly language falls short of grasping it; so we can only point to the glory of heaven with symbolic imagery. We tend to think of heaven as a place, since we live in space and time, but it is clear in the Bible that heaven actually is not so much a place as it is a spiritual condition. It is the condition of being in union with God. Through faith in Christ, we are brought into a fellowship with God that continues to grow throughout eternity; and this then is heaven—sharing forever in the love and the blessing of God.

But if heaven is the eternal condition of being in fellowship with God, what about those who are not in fellowship with God? What about those who reject God, who deny God in their beliefs or who deny God with their lives? We often hear about criminals and terrorists who act wholly contrary to God, committing great evil. When people live in complete alienation from God, what happens when they die and enter into eternity? Logically, they continue to be in alienation from God. But to be cut off from God is to be cut off finally from all goodness and blessing and light. This then is hell—the spiritual condition of being alienated completely from God.

So the New Testament speaks also of hell, and when it offers any sort of picture of hell, that picture, analogous to the picture of heaven, has two key features—it portrays the absence of God, and it uses symbolic imagery. It uses symbolic imagery because no earthly language is really adequate to express the horror of being cut off from God into eternity. Of all the symbols for hell, the central New Testament image is the one that Jesus uses in the passage we heard from the gospel of Mark.

Jesus refers in that passage to hell, and the word he uses, which is the most common New Testament word for hell, is actually a name that packs a powerful symbolic punch. The word is *Gehenna*, which was the name of a garbage dump located just outside the ancient city of Jerusalem. Gehenna had a history so horrible it surpasses all the horror novels or movies you've likely ever encountered. In ancient times, before faith in the Lord had taken hold in the land, children had been sacrificed by fire to the pagan idol Molech in the ravine of Gehenna. It was considered by the people of Israel to be such a reprehensible place that they had made it into a garbage dump. The refuse of the city was heaved into the spot, and fires were set, which smoldered continually, like a huge incinerator. Gehenna was a stench-filled, smoke-filled place, crawling with worms and vermin. If you wanted a symbolic picture of some place horrible, this was it.

You will note that several of our common images of hell come straight out of that smoldering garbage dump—the idea that hell is a place of fire and smoke, and that it is crawling with disgusting and terrible creatures. Of course, when Jesus used this image, he was not saying that hell is literally like this. He was using a word symbol that was familiar to people in Israel and that they had already come to use as a picture for hell—a picture of how terrible it is to be cut off from God.

Jesus uses other pictures for hell. In his parable of the rich man and Lazarus, in which the rich man ignores the needs of Lazarus, the conclusion of the story is that the rich man dies and goes to hell. In this story, Jesus uses the term Hades for hell—calling to mind the Greek imagery of the underworld—and the rich man is pictured being separated from Abraham and the blessing of God by a chasm, and being tormented by fire. *[In Hades, where he was in torment, the rich saw Abraham far away [across a chasm], and called to him, 'Father Abraham, send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire. Luke 16:23-24]* Again, this is not meant to be understood literally,

but it is a graphic picture of the condition of being separated from God, and the pain of that condition.

Such pictures make us uncomfortable, because we believe that God is a God of love, and even though there are people like this rich man who are not nice and who are undeserving, we struggle with the idea that such people would be tormented forever in hell. This very likely is why the idea of hell has become unpopular in our time.

But we cannot so easily write off hell, because Jesus clearly affirmed the reality of hell, and the rest of the New Testament does so as well, as for example the passage we heard from II Thessalonians, which says, “Those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” (II Thess. 1:8-9) There’s the basic idea of hell as separation from God. It is a grim concept, to be sure; but as uncomfortable as the idea of hell may be, it is important to recognize that in affirming the concept of hell, the New Testament is actually affirming several very important truths.

It affirms that human beings have genuine freedom, to make real choices that have real consequences. If there is no hell, it means that even if you try to choose against God, it won’t matter. You’ll get dragged kicking and screaming into heaven no matter what. The concept of hell says that you can choose to reject God and alienate yourself from God, and if you persist in that choice, you get what you choose—a state of perpetual alienation from God, which is hell.

The concept of hell also affirms that we are accountable to God for our actions, and that there will be justice. What happens to people who do horrendous wrongs and escape justice on earth? Do they just vault into heaven? The concept of hell says that God’s justice is ultimately done; or as Paul expressed it in a passage we heard last week, “For all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that we each may receive what is due for what we have done, whether good or evil.” (II Cor. 5:10) Here perhaps is one reason why the idea of hell is not so popular nowadays; people would rather not be held accountable!

The concept of hell thus also lends urgency and weight to our life choices. Many people today have the feeling that it doesn’t really matter what you do in this life. But there is a real sense of urgency that is present in Jesus’ words that we heard this morning, when he said, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell.” (Mark 9:43) Jesus surely is not giving us literal instructions here, but in using such graphic language he clearly is saying that what we do here makes a difference into eternity, and he is calling us to take decisive steps to put our lives on the right track.

So the idea of hell, while negative in itself, has some positive implications for living. Conversely, the diminishment of the idea of hell that has occurred in the popular mindset may have some negative implications. It is interesting to observe that even as hell has “disappeared” in the last century from prominence in religious thinking, the world itself has become more hellish, with people engaging in all sorts of horrific deeds. It may be that

as people feel that they are not truly accountable to God, or that there is no urgent need to set life aright, they contribute to an increase in hell on earth.

But if hell is real, both in eternity and as a state of affairs in some places on earth, the big question is: What does God do about it? Is God content to just let the condition of hell persist? The Biblical answer is: God acts through Jesus Christ to defeat hell. God acts to bring people out of their alienation from God into God's grace and life. God acts to overcome the hells we have made on this earth. God acts to defeat the powers of evil and death in order that we may live in the light of heaven. So as we put our faith in Christ, we not only experience God's deliverance and God's promise for ourselves, but we also are not content that anyone else should be in hell. We reach out to others to invite them to experience God's grace. We join as a church to overcome the hells of our age, and indeed Jesus had promised Peter that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church." [*"... I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."* Matt. 16:18] And we trust in the saving power of Christ, knowing that in Christ we can withstand every form of darkness and evil.

But if we are not content that anyone should be in hell, can God be content that some people remain in hell forever? We have noted this morning that the concept of hell is itself logically necessary—that if heaven is the condition of being in fellowship with God, then there must be the opposite spiritual condition of being alienated from God, the condition of hell. But will God leave anyone in that condition forever? We will address this question next Sunday, as we pursue further aspects of the idea of hell. But it is good to remember that to the question, "Whatever happened to hell?" there is one very good spiritual answer—hell is overcome through Jesus Christ. Through Christ we can enter today into fellowship with God—a fellowship which brings us into God's life and into God's promise forever.