

Today—a provocative topic, “Jesus and Hell.” I think we should pray:

Jesus and Hell—this is a surprisingly controversial subject with a number of prominent pastors and theologians coming to the conclusion that there is no hell and everyone is saved. Others, also prominent theologians, conclude that of course there is hell—and by the way, all those who say there isn’t are probably going there. We do not have time today to unpack why either side takes the position they do, or to do an in-depth Biblical study on the point. There are several different words that, depending on what translation of the Bible you read, may be translated as hell, some of which, historically only mean the land of the dead—and that is part of the source of the disagreement, along with Jesus’ statements like, “Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:17)

But we will leave THAT topic to another time. What is important to know, is that the **concept of a place of eternal suffering after you die, was, in Jesus’ time, a relatively new concept—only a few hundred years old—and not one originally found in ancient Judaism.** In fact, there are many Jews today who will tell you that Judaism has no concept of an afterlife at all.

But there were those in Israel who believed in an afterlife, and those who **didn’t**—you can even see the debate hinted to in the Bible itself, such as in Matthew 22:23

“²³The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection;” **and then they asked about a woman who was married 7 times in succession—who would she be married to?** Jesus, by the way, responds that they do not understand the resurrection. The Pharisees, on the other hand, although often the target of Jesus’ **harsh criticism, do believe in the resurrection,** as set out in Acts 23:8. Why these different views? Because the idea of an afterlife, particularly an afterlife of torment, came into Judaism from the cultures around them.

The Egyptians believed in an afterlife and that the good people, who had done good deeds during life would have a light heart and could travel into the land of two fields—a beautiful place. But if your heart was heavy, because you did bad things, you would be thrown to the devourer—an alligator-like God who would eat you.

The Babylonians—where many of the Hebrews were exiled for more than 100 years—believed in Zoroastrianism, a faith that believed in the battle between good and evil and that “**at the time of death, the soul must pass over a narrow bridge. At the entrance to the bridge stands the daenā, or conscience, a maiden who becomes identified with the individual soul. The good souls see a beautiful and dignified woman, while the evil souls see a witch. The good, led by the maiden, will pass over to the “House of Songs” or Paradise as angel-like beings who will serve as guardians of the living good people. The souls of those who have lived evil lives will be attacked by the witch and will fall as demons into the dark cold ravine or “House of Lies” that is Hell.**”ⁱ

Finally, the Greeks and Romans believed in an afterlife—and they were the dominant culture of the time. So these ideas crept into Judaism. Fundamentally—good people would have a good afterlife and bad people would suffer.

And it was easy to know who was a good person—because they were blessed even in this life. They were blessed with riches and health and a family, and so you knew they were blessed by God.

That's what most people in the ancient world believed. Those bound for eternal punishment were careless about religious purity and laws, poor, lower class, sick or disabled. If someone was down and out—it was their own fault. Being down and out was proof enough because it was proof that God had judged you and found you unworthy. The poor were poor because they were poor in behavior **and in understanding and in following God's rules.**

The sick were sick because they were being punished. Remember the disciples asking Jesus about a blind man, was he blind because of his own sins or because of the sins of his parents. Illness, poverty, ignorance, disability--these were all signs of a sinful and undisciplined life.

We see this view reflected in our scripture lessons:

The rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus was a poor beggar, disabled and lying **outside the rich man's home, just hoping for enough scraps to keep himself alive.** He suffered terribly, with open sores and, in days long before antibiotics and modern medicine, undoubtedly had infections and perhaps even bugs or maggots in his open wounds.

I suppose it isn't surprising then that the rich man would avoid him. We see this same attitude hinted at in the judgment of the nations, the Lord says, come, you who inherit the kingdom, for you saw me hungry and fed me, naked and clothed me, thirsty and gave me drink, in prison or sick and visited me. "When did we see you that way?" they ask. Because **it couldn't be the King** who would be sick or in prison or naked or poor.

In some ways that hasn't changed much. We hear it today—the poor are poor **because they make bad choices. The sick are sick because they don't take care of themselves, don't practice any self-discipline.** The uneducated are lazy. There are even some today that assert that if you are Godly and upright, you will have riches and health and social status. We call this the prosperity gospel.

And it's very comforting to those who have their riches and cars and big houses. There's no guilt or obligation because those very things are proof that God loves them and that they are good people, just as they are. It can even be comforting for those who want—because if they are just good enough, if they just believe hard enough, then they too will be rich, and well, and happy.

Ancient times right up to today. It is amazing how somethings never change. Then along comes Jesus.

Jesus, like the Pharisees (that's a phrase you don't hear often) Jesus, like the Pharisees, believed in life after this one, an eternal life. Death was clearly not the end—from John 14: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe

also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going. . . . In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live."

So, yes, Jesus believed in an after- life. But what of hell? Who was going to hell? And like he did with so many other things, Jesus turns the idea of hell on its head. Who is going to hell? **Let's return to the Lazarus story.**

Lazarus dies and is taken to Abraham's bosom—that is, paradise—and the rich man dies and goes into eternal torment. He asks if Lazarus couldn't perhaps provide him with a little comfort—but no, the gulf is too wide, besides, you received good things in life, now you suffer and Lazarus who suffered in life, now gets good things.

In perhaps my favorite turn of the story, the rich man asks if Lazarus could go to his family, so they could repent.

It reminds me of A Christmas Carol—can you send Marley and the spirits of Christmas past, present and future—then they would repent and be saved. No says Abraham—they have God's words, the prophets and the law to guide them. They don't need anything else.

I suppose at first glance this story seems to say those who suffer in this life will have a glorious afterlife and those who have a good life now will suffer—but that is misreading it, as the judgment of the nations shows. Because in that story the people who will inherit the kingdom must have had wealth—at least enough to give away food and clothing and shelter. So it is not a simple—the wealthy are bad and the poor are good.

Rather, those going to hell are the wealthy, the prosperous, those who are concerned with religious purity and cleanliness to the point that they step over the unclean lying in the gutter. The proud people who judge and insult and exclude—or at a minimum avoid—all those who were down and out. The ones who were quick to judge others unworthy and fussed about straining out gnats but swallow camels—sure you pay your tithe, but you ignore mercy and justice and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23-24)—and the latter is far more important than the former.

The religious elite who condemned the needy, to them Jesus said: "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites." (Matthew 23:25)

So who then goes to heaven? Who is given a sweet reward? The one that was stepped over—Lazarus the poor man, the excluded, the deprived, the ones society rejected, the prostitutes and tax collectors, even the thief on the cross who hung condemned. Imagine how the religious folk would respond to having their idea of heaven turned completely upside down.

"Jesus wasn't so much teaching about hell as he was *unteaching* it," says Brian McLaren. (McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 113, Kindle edition, emphasis in original).

In so doing, Jesus was declaring a radical new understanding of God—God loved the downtrodden.

God was for the dispossessed and the unfortunate and the ones who are suffering and struggling in this life, even the sinful and morally lost. God loves them all. They are all children of God, sheep of his flock. Rather than lessons of condemnation, these are teachings of salvation and Jesus is saying, what you think you know, you don't. **Those you would judge, God welcomes**, and those who feel safe and secure in their piety—those are the ones who are in danger. Your job is to show mercy and kindness, even as God gives you mercy.

But far too often Jesus' teachings on the afterlife and who gets to go there are turned around and used for the opposite effect.

Fire and brimstone sermons, we call them, when Jesus' teachings of hell are used as a club against the very people Jesus said get to heaven: sinners—since we are all sinners, should we call them the apparent or obvious sinners(?), the sick, the poor, those not of the religious elite but instead who are homeless and suffering.

Jesus' teachings on the afterlife and his talk of fire and desolation was not to create a permanent gulf between the righteous and the unrighteous, but rather to turn people's hearts around, to warn them of the dangers they were facing through their judgment of others and their lack of mercy and justice.

He challenged them to change, to take a new path in life, one that would likely be rocky and steep and unpopular—and he used the strongest images he could, images they knew and could understand because the ideas had become part of their culture—the idea of permanent punishment. **If you don't want to face a terrible judgment, says Jesus, you need to look into your own heart and find mercy and see people as God sees them and love them as God loves them.**

Because just as the Jonah story is not about punishing Ninevah but redeeming it **and how God's love is bigger than ours, Jesus' message is about redemption, and salvation and God's great love for all God's children.**

And it is not an easy message. It is not a popular one—even today. After all this time and even in a nation that so often wants to call itself a Christian nations, still we see many, especially the religious, the wealthy, those like the rich man in the Lazarus story, who judge the homeless, the uneducated, the unemployed and the chronically ill as unworthy, as someone to step over, as someone doomed to suffer the hellfires. Like Jonah, we do not want sinners forgiven—well, not those sinners, our own minor sins, yes, but the sins of a murderer? A drug addict? A prostitute? A thief? Someone who is lazy? No, they deserve what they get—in this life and the next. Brian McLaren says: "Like Jonah, they seem disappointed **that God's grace might get the final word.**" (McLaren, 114) **As Jesus' followers we are called to a different understanding. This week, where will you see Lazarus? How will you respond? Will you respond like the rich man? Or like those who do unto the least of these God's children, giving grace and care to one in need?**

Amen

¹ <http://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803133541542>