

The Reality of Hell, Part 1  
Pastor Larry Kroon  
Wasilla Bible Church  
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Ok. Today we're coming to the end of our summer sermon series dealing with those questions, those challenges, those issues that are oftentimes raised against Christianity; those questions that are posed that say, 'Do you really believe that? And if so, how can you?'; questions and challenges that even cause Christians at times to hesitate and say, 'Do I really believe that? And if so, how can I?' We've been working through a whole series of those kinds of questions and challenges, and today we come to the last one...which I feel, for me personally, is maybe the most difficult of them all. It isn't the most foundational, but I think it may be the most difficult, at least for me personally. And that is the Christian teaching with respect to hell.

We're gonna start off with a kind of a working definition, a functional definition that we'll have and we'll use to operate against as we go through today and cover this material. And if you were to pick up a typical Christian textbook, a theology book, you would find under the concept of hell, the statement of hell, you'll find a definition something like this—this one comes straight from a systematic theology text book—that 'hell is a place of eternal conscious punishment for the wicked.' We can say that it's the place where those who reject or resist the rule of God will live forever in endless suffering.

It's best to have that definition against the backdrop of biblical teaching, and so I'll put that backdrop in place. The Bible's very clear. Jesus Himself was very emphatic that there is, out there ahead of us in the flow of human history, a great and final day of reckoning, a Day of Judgment; a day in which we will be held in account for all the things we've done, all the things we've said, all the things we've thought, even the very motives of our hearts will be held accountable. And at that time, in that great Day of Judgment, Jesus makes it very clear that there will be a separation between the righteous and the wicked, between those who receive and accept and honor the rule of God in their lives, or those who reject it and say, 'God will not rule me. I'm gonna go my own way.' There's a separation that is permanent coming out of that judgment. Jesus compared it to a harvest, where wheat and weeds are separated; and the weeds are thrown in to be burned, and the wheat is harvested to be enjoyed. Or He compares it to commercial fishing with a dragnet, and where the good fish are brought on shore and taken out, and the by catch is thrown away. It's a great and final day of separation between those who reject the will of God, the rule of God in their lives, and those who receive it and accept it.

Those who receive the rule of God, who respond to it and accept it in their lives—those will enter into eternal life in His kingdom. They will enjoy His rule forever. Those who reject the rule of God, those who have said 'no, we're gonna live life on our own terms in our own way,' will come out of that judgment and be condemned to unending torment in a place Jesus called Gehenna. We translate that as 'hell.' Gehenna, the term Jesus used most often when He spoke of hell and pointed towards it, is a term coming out of the Old Testament. It's built on a Hebrew word that was a name for a valley just outside of Jerusalem. In a time of great apostasy the kings of Israel had turned that valley, right there next to Jerusalem, into a worship center for pagan gods. And there, in that valley, kings of Israel sacrificed their own children to pagan gods. In a great time of reformation under the king Josiah, in the Old Testament times, that valley was declared unclean. It was set apart to be used as a garbage dump, where refuse was deposited and a fire continually burned. And so when you spoke of Gehenna, this awful image of a smoldering garbage dump is what came to people's minds. And when Jesus spoke of hell that's the term He used...Gehenna.

He used that term more than any other writer, or speaker, or teacher in the New Testament. Oftentimes, like the first time He ever used it, teaching with His disciples the great Sermon on the Mount, the first time we ever have a record of Him talking about hell, He simply speaks of it as a fiery hell, as Gehenna. Other times when He speaks of it, if you go on through the gospels, you'll find that He builds on that imagery of that garbage dump. For example, in the gospel of Mark He speaks of Gehenna, "...where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." In other words, it's this garbage dump that is always smoldering, and it's worms and fire, maggots and burning. Other times He doesn't use the term Gehenna. He would simply speak of an outer darkness somewhere outside the kingdom of God; outside God's city is this outer darkness where there's "*weeping and gnashing of teeth*," a phrase He used often when He spoke of Gehenna, of hell, of the outer darkness; a weeping and gnashing of teeth, a place where there's sorrow, there's bitterness, and there is anger. He called it the outer darkness. Other places He spoke of it as the furnace of fire, still keeping that comment of weeping and gnashing of teeth. He repeated that a lot when He spoke of hell, of Gehenna; a furnace of fire. He also speaks of it as the eternal fire, an interesting statement in

Matthew 25. He speaks of it as “...*the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.*” Interesting comment there, because it tells us that hell, this dump as it were, was not originally created for mankind, those who rebel against God’s rule in humanity. It was originally created for Satan and his demonic hoard that rebelled originally against God. It has become a place for those who join in that rebellion.

It’s a place that has a physicality to it. He speaks another place of fearing Him, fearing God, who is able to destroy, who is able to condemn both soul and body to Gehenna, to hell. It’s a statement where Jesus is saying, ‘Don’t fear what anybody else can do to you. If you want to be concerned about somebody, be concerned about the One who can cast your soul and body into hell.’

No only is there a physicality to it, there’s an eternity to it. He speaks in that same chapter about those who have been condemned to hell, who go away into eternal punishment; in other words, a punishment that will never end. And it’s put in contrast to the righteous, who will enter into eternal life, a life that will never end.

You go on through scripture and you’ll find places where it’s...the imagery is intensified, as it were. If you go to the book of Revelation you’ll find some references to Gehenna, to hell, there. And near the end of the book of Revelation it’ll be spoken of as a lake of fire and brimstone, and it’s pictures as that place where the Antichrist and his followers, and Satan and the demonic, and those who join in rebellion against God are all thrown into this lake of fire and brimstone, tormented day and night forever and ever. Some places the imagery is intensified.

Other places in scripture you’ll find that the imagery fades to the background and we don’t talk so much about what torment is entered into so much as what is lost. The Apostle Paul speaking of the eternal destruction, he says in 2 Thessalonians, writing to a group of new believers who are kind of confused about all of this, and he says, ‘Listen, the penalty of eternal destruction,’ as he describes it, he goes on and he says, ‘is to be away from the presence of the Lord, and the glory of His power.’ It’s the penalty of those who say ‘no’ to God in this life and as a result will never know Him in eternity, in the outer darkness, away from His presence, and the glory, the wonder, the splendor of His power.

Working with that I find that there’s not a whole lot more given us in scripture. I have covered most of the New Testament references to hell in just these few minutes. There’s not a whole lot of data. Some people take that data and really expand upon the details with intensifying the literal details and the drama of it. Others go the opposite direction and follow more Paul’s pattern and dwell and treat the imagery more metaphorically, and just look at the awfulness of being away from God forever and ever. I tend to just simply think of a garbage dump.

However we, as Christians, deal with it and wrestle with those details, we’ll find that there are many set against that idea. It’s not a welcome truth to teach. One writer named Christopher Hitchens, in his book entitled “God is Not Good”, makes this statement. He’s an atheist and he says “Nothing proves the manmade character of religion as obviously as the sick mind that designated or designed hell.” ‘Nothing proves that you Christians have just made things up so much as the fact that you talk about a place called hell.’ In fact, he feels so strongly about this that he would accuse Christians, because we teach of hell to our children, he would accuse us of child abuse. In fact, that’s the name of the title which he speaks of this, of the chapter. But it isn’t just the aggressive atheist that says this. You look at groups that have splintered off of Christianity, the cults, and you’ll find a similar attitude. The Jehovah Witnesses’ position that who is responsible for this God-defaming doctrine of hell, of torment...they would say that it comes straight from Satan. This teaching is not from God, the Jehovah Witness would say; it’s straight from Satan, designed, their founders said, to drive people away from scripture and to keep them out of their bibles.

It isn’t just the cults. It isn’t just the aggressive atheist. Even within evangelical Christianity there is a hesitation. In fact, there’s a rejection of this teaching. Clark Pennock, a Canadian evangelical, writes “How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness? The God who would place people in hell forever? How can Christians teach that? That is more nearly like Satan than like God.” This is a man who presents himself as a Christian in the evangelical circles.

The three protests that are usually raised against hell and the teaching of it is, number one, it’s not loving. We say that God is love; that He would ever do this to one of His creatures—put them in eternal torment—is not love. So that teaching is not worthy of the God of scripture. Then there are those who say, ‘You know what? It’s not fair, either.’ Now most people will welcome the idea that there is a reckoning after this life, that there is a time when all that is wrong will be made right. The quote that Ashley used last week, the quote that “Someday all that is sad will come untrue,” the fact that everything will be set right—we welcome that idea. That’s fair; we want that. But we hesitate when we start talking about an eternity for things done in the present life. And we hesitate and say ‘Wow, just because you did that during your forty years, or seventy years, how can God condemn you for an eternity?’

That's not fair! Maybe for a Hitler, but not for the general person.' And then there's the protest that it's not fitting, that here we've all the beauty, and the glory, and the wonder of God's eternal kingdom, a new heaven and a new earth; and the response comes back and says how can we talk about anything such as a garbage dump continuing on for eternity. It doesn't fit.

So, many dismiss it as nonsense. Christopher Hitchens does. In fact, he calls it worse than nonsense; he says it's unhealthy, and we destroy people when we talk about it. Others may not dismiss it, but they promise an eventual release—that sometimes in the eons ahead people will be released. Maybe certain people will serve for a hundred years to make up for the wrongs they've done and then they'll be released. And others for a thousand years, and maybe some for ten thousand years, and the really bad—who knows? But someday God will redeem them all; He will change them all, and all will be brought into His kingdom of light. And then there's those who would say, 'You know what? There is consequence for what we do in this life, and that consequence is that you finally, totally taken out of existence; annihilation.' It isn't that you are in torment in hell forever. It's you are condemned and you are totally annihilated. You cease to exist. They look at the word 'destroyed' and they say, 'See? Jesus said "...destroy the body and soul..." That's what He's talkin' about...it just totally destroys 'em. But their mistake is that 'destroy' doesn't mean 'cease to exist.' The car totaled in an accident doesn't cease to exist; it's crumpled hulk is put in the wrecking yard.

Hell...Gehenna...the place of unending torment. Question—how can I teach the reality of such a place when so many would say it's not loving, it's not fair, and it's not fitting? I want you to track the next couple of statements very carefully, because this is the only way I can bring myself to teach the reality of hell. We've seen this sequence before, earlier in this series, but never does it apply more importantly than right now. Number one—I believe the Bible produces or provides a reliable record of what Jesus said and did. I believe that when we pick up the New Testament we have an accurate record of what Jesus said and did. We spent two weeks at the start of this series reviewing that idea, that truth, that claim. It's foundational. I believe we have an accurate record of what Jesus said and did in the New Testament documents. And I also believe, when I read what Jesus said and did in that reliable record, that He is to be trusted. He is to be trusted. And when I read what He said and did, I recognize that His teachings confirm the reality of hell. All but two of the biblical quotes and statements I gave you with respect to hell were directly from the words of Jesus. There is no teacher in the New Testament who spoke of it more than Jesus did. In fact, he spoke more about avoiding hell than He spoke about entering heaven. He taught it. I trust Him. And I believe we have an accurate record of what He said. And as a result, I believe in the reality of hell.

Now, I don't know how to put it all together, and here I very much go back to one of my favorite verses—the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 says this. He says "...now we see in a mirror dimly, but then..." the time when we finally see God in all His glory, and Jesus Christ, when we see face to face then...then we will see. And he goes on and says "...now I know in part..." There's things I do not know, but then I will truly know fully. There's a lot about this I don't know. I do know...I *do* know that God loves us. That was settled at the cross. And I do know that there are those who will not accept His love, and reject it, and in the process reject it forever. I do believe that God is fair and just, and I do believe that our understanding of sin, and our concept of how we react in situations is so limited in terms of the severity and the consequence of sin that we can't imagine the idea that consequence may go on forever, because we don't have that strong a view of sin. But I still can't comprehend how it goes on forever and is fair, but I believe it. And someday I believe I'll know how it fits.

Went on a kayak trip with a group of teenagers, and we were...this is two or three weeks ago. And one night...they call it a night paddle...we go out in the very darkness of the night. And you can't see. And you get in these kayaks, and up above you see stars, and there's phosphorescence in the water. And so every time a paddle goes in there's an explosion of color. It's just an awesome experience. But everything is dark other than the stars above and the bright lights in the water. It's dark. And you've got a guide in front of you with a green light on his back, and another one off to the right of you has a green [should be red] light on hers. And you're told "Stay between these two lights and always follow the green one." And through the middle of that night that's what we did. We couldn't even see each other clearly in the kayaks together. We couldn't see what was all around us. We'd be told, "You've gotta follow me right here" and over there we'd hear a sound, and he'd say "Don't go over there; there's rocks, we don't want you over there. You've gotta stay with me." And we went through that night, and all through the night we'd talk to each other. We'd sing, we told stories. It was everything else. But the whole time we just followed the green light.

This is one of those times where I don't know everything around me, and I can't see it all. But I will follow the One I've chosen to be my guide; and His name is Jesus. And He says there's a hell. I believe Him.

There's a challenge to that. I can get there intellectually; it's very difficult to get there emotionally, to live that out emotionally. In fact, one of my favorite writers—a mentor, in fact, in his writings to me years ago—a man by the name of John Stott wrote emotionally near the end of his writing (he's still alive); but as he's nearing the end of his career he's made a shift in his teaching, and he says this: "Emotionally I find the concept of hell intolerant and do not understand how people can live with it." He says, "They either have to deaden their feelings or they will crack." And so, for emotional reasons, he's pulled away.

It's a difficult one practically. In this entire year, or summer, as we've dealt with 'How do explain this? How do you reply to this?' the toughest challenge I had was an individual that said to me, "Do you guys believe in hell?" I said yes. He says, "Why don't you live like it?" 'How can you be out there playing softball? How can you be out there having picnics? How can you be out there buying and selling new vehicles? People are going to hell!'

What we're going to do over the next two weeks, maybe one week but possibly two, is I'm going to come back and revisit these two issues, because I think we have to be careful with them. How *do* we handle this teaching emotionally? And how do we do it, and handle it, and respond to it on a practical level? We're gonna cover that in the next couple of weeks. What I wanna do as we close today is I just wanna take us back to the first time Jesus ever mentioned it, because this is one of the most unsettling statements I have with respect to hell. Jesus is giving His teaching, His first lesson, His first gathering of His disciples, and He makes a comment to them. He says 'You have heard it said that if somebody murders somebody they are gonna be guilty in court. You kill somebody, they're gonna drag you in court, and you're gonna be punished.' He says, 'But I tell you somethin' else. If you're angry with somebody, if you call them an airhead, if you call them a fool,' literally, the word 'moron', 'you're not just guilty in the courts of men. You are guilty for hell.' When He speaks of the day of accountability He says you will be accountable for every careless word you have spoken. And in this creation of our God, when we call one another names we have crossed the line.

Recent research by the George Barna Institute indicates that eighty-one percent (81%) in America believes in life after death. Of those, seventy-six percent (76%) believe heaven exists, and seventy-one percent (71%) believe that there's some sort of hell out there. In other words, the vast majority of our population, four-fifths (4/5) of the American population believes that life doesn't stop at death. And then a high percentage of those, seventy-five percent (75%) believe that yeah, there's somethin' good kinda like heaven out there, and others believe...seventy percent (70%)...there's somethin' bad for those who've been bad, somethin' like hell. Others just say, 'We don't know what's out there.' Interesting statistic that follows up—point five percent (0.5%) believe that they may ever go to hell. Most everybody's goin' to God's kingdom! I mean, you're gonna find a Hitler and a Stalin...yeah, they will go. But most of us? No.

Listen, I don't have any choice. My responsibility is to stand in front of you and say what Jesus said. He said this—

*"The gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who will enter through it."*

And in comparison He says

*"The gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few [comparatively] who find it."*

There's good news that comes with that, about that narrow way. Statement found in John chapter 3 that

*"He who believes in the Son has eternal life."*

John says

*"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him [who trusts Him] shall not perish, but will have eternal life."*

That's grace, that's good news. But with that grace and with that good news there is also truth, the truth that must be spoken and has been spoken by our God. He who does not obey the Son, who does not answer the call of Jesus to follow Him, to trust Him—those who do not respond to that call, the wrath of God abides; it stays, it never leaves.

It's hard to talk like this in our culture. But if we're gonna speak of Jesus, we have to. And so I'm gonna ask you to stand with me as we close our prayer song as a congregation. And as we sing it today in confidence, I want us to be able to sing it as people who will follow Jesus—not only what He did, but what He said.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in that grace. Amen.