

The Reality of Hell, Part 2
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The very core of our congregation is five core commitments that we have thought through, we've prayed over, we've articulated, and we've reviewed, and we've posted, we keep in front of ourselves as a congregation. We say, 'You know what? These are the things that define us, that shape our lives as a group of believers.' And foremost, and the center one of those all, the top foremost one of 'em is the one that simply states the centrality of Christ, the idea being that in everything we do, Jesus is gonna be the One we do it around. He is the center of who we are as a people. He is the One that we exalt, He is the One that we listen to, His are the promises we pursue, His are the warnings we heed, His are the commands we follow, His are the truths we cherish. Jesus is central to us as a congregation.

One of the challenges that come with that, when we say that is a core commitment for us—in fact, it is a leading, defining core commitment of our congregational lives—one of the challenges that comes with that is if Jesus is going to be central to us individually and congregationally, then we must live as a people who believe...who actually believe...in the reality of hell. If we are gonna say Jesus is the One who we are going to follow, His words are the ones we will heed, His life is the one that we are going to honor, then we have to be a people who actually believe in the reality...and live in that belief...the reality of hell, to live knowing and convinced that there are those around us who reject the rule of Jesus Christ, God's anointed king, in their lives, and because they reject Him—God's anointed king, they will spend eternity in a place of unending suffering. I say that's a challenge...to live as those who actually believe in hell. I say that's a challenge because so many Christians are unprepared for that.

We're confused. Why must we live that way? Or even if they recognize that 'yeah, we should believe in the reality of a hell,' they're not sure exactly how that should shape the way we live. I mean, how do we interact with the people around us? And probably even more difficult in all is the challenge—how do we react emotionally? Especially when among our family and friends there are those who reject the rule of Jesus?

The goal today is to prepare us to be a people who do actually live as those who believe in the reality of hell as we enter into a new school year with Jesus at the center of our congregational life. It's gonna take a few minutes to do this. We're gonna go through four different things to prepare us to live as people who actually believe in the reality of hell. Number one will be a simple logic sequence that I'll walk us through fairly quickly. We saw it last week. Then, secondly, I'll go on and I'm gonna look at two biblical passages. And then, finally, we're goin' back to one of the oldest and most biblical traditions of all. Four things today—a logical sequence, a verse, followed by another verse, and then together a tradition, a remembrance of Jesus.

That's where we're headed. Let's start with a logic sequence, because we as Christians are not called to take blind leaps of faith. We are called to believe in things with good reason. When you become a Christian it isn't suddenly stop thinking and just believing. As Christians we're called to believe because we have good reasons. When it comes to believing in the reality of hell, we do have good reason. The reason is a sequence of steps I can walk you through, beginning with this one; and you've seen it, we've reviewed it, and I wanna keep reviewing it because it is so fundamental to the way we, as Christians, think about issues like this. Number one is that we are convinced that the Bible provides a reliable record of what Jesus said and did, that when you pick up the scriptures you have an accurate picture of what Jesus actually did when He was among us and what He actually said. Fundamental to everything is we believe that Jesus...we have a reliable record of what Jesus said and did in the scriptures.

Following up on that in this logic sequence is the fact that what Jesus said and did, what we have a record of, convinces me that He is to be trusted. When we look at that record, that reliable record of what He said and did, and we look at it, and we think about it, and we analyze it, we walk away believing He is a person to be trusted. Among all the men of history, and all the women of history, among all those who have been presented as great teachers, and philosophers, and people of truth, He is the one to be trusted.

And then we come to the third step in this sequence—His teachings affirm the reality of hell. He called it Gehenna. And of all the teachers in scriptures, He's the one who spoke most of the reality of Gehenna, the place of unending torment.

That leaves the fourth and final step in the sequence—I believe in the reality of hell, simply because Jesus said there is such a place. We need to be clear-headed about this. I don't know of any other teaching in the biblical picture, or the Christian faith, that is more challenged than this one...whether it's the aggressive atheist that, like Christopher Hitchens, who claims that we, as Christians, are guilty of child abuse because we teach the reality of hell to our children; or whether it's the splinter cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses, who have decided that the doctrine, the teaching, of hell is from the devil; or whether it's hesitant Christians that come against this teaching and just say, 'Oh, we just can't go that far, that God would condemn people to hell'—we need to be clear-headed about this. So many people would argue it, so many people would dispute it; many very brilliant philosophers and very many studied individuals will say 'no, there cannot be such a place;' we come back and say, 'Yes, there is, because Jesus said.' We have an accurate record of what He said and did. What He said and did confirms He is to be trusted. He affirmed there is such a place. He said it; I believe it. That's our first step today, a logic sequence.

Follow that up with a text that deals with an issue that comes right at us when we begin to say there is such a place as hell. And there are people around us that are headed there. And the next question is 'What do we do? I mean, how loud do we have to yell? What do we need to do with our careers, our jobs, our possessions, and everything else? What do we do if there's people going to hell? What is the practical response?' There's a passage of scripture that is really important to me on this; because when this subject comes up and the question is 'What do we do?' I can almost get...I can almost freeze up in terms of "Oh man, what do I do?" Very important verse. It's found in 1 Timothy 4. And the Apostle Paul is writing to a younger minister who is pastoring a church in probably one of the darkest communities of the world at that time in terms of spirituality. It was a community that was devoted to the occult, and magic, and magicians, and sorcery, and pagan gods. And a church had been planted in that community of Ephesus. Timothy was the pastor who was there leading that church. And so he had this young pastor who was burdened for the community he was in, and he knows these people are rejecting the rule of God. He believes in the reality of hell and that they are headed to that destination. And he's 'What do I do?' And what intrigues me is how the Apostle Paul tells him to pastor in that community, and what he should concentrate on. And he gives him this instruction. He says to him

Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things.

He says, 'Timothy,' and as you look through the entire letter you'll see some of the things he's talking about. He says, 'Timothy, make sure you're making right decisions God-ward. Timothy, make sure you're speaking about people correctly, with compassion and with grace. Timothy, make sure that your sexual behavior is pure. Timothy, make sure that you're righteous in all your dealings with business and individuals.' He says, 'Timothy, take care with how you're walking with God...your attitudes, your actions, your words. Be careful. Pay attention to your own walk.' And then, secondly, he says 'and pay attention to your teaching, what you say about God. Don't get caught up in speculation; don't get caught up in philosophy; don't get caught up in worldly fables and myths and genealogies.' He says, 'Speak the truth.' Speak the truth.

I have a friend. He's a pilot. And he was talking to me. He said, "Larry, I wonder sometimes how you can get up and speak in front of people." He said, "I'd be so nervous...I wouldn't be able to..." He said, "You've got all those people there, and they're facing issues and life situations. How can you get up and talk to 'em?" He said, "I'd be just totally frozen. I wouldn't know what to say. I'd be panicked; my words would be stumbling all over me, which I do anyway." And he's sayin' this, and I look back at him and I say, "Well how can you fly your airplane with two hundred people behind you and their life depending on you making right decisions? At the right time and the right way?" I love his response. He looked back at me and he says, "You know, I don't think about 'em." He says, "I figure if I get myself down safely, they'll be with me."

It's a little different here, but it's a similar idea. Look at the rest of this verse. He says, 'If you persevere in these things, and you're careful about your walk and your words,

...you will insure salvation both for yourself and those who hear you.

Now, he's talkin' to a pastor here, but it applies to all believers. All of us have a sphere of influence where people are around us. And what Paul's saying... you know what? If you're careful with your walk, God-ward, and you are careful what you say about God, you are gonna have a saving influence not only in your own life for yourself, but on those who are around you and who hear you. That's the first of the two verses, and it answers to the practical question—what do I do? Be careful in your walk, and speak with clarity and truth about God.

Second verse I'm gonna take you...deals with probably a tougher issue, and that's what I would call the emotions of really believing in the reality of hell, especially when we have loved ones who've rejected the rule of Jesus in their lives. One of my favorite Christian theologians has backed away in recent years completely from the idea of teaching the reality of hell. He teaches now that once you die, and if you haven't followed Jesus, you just cease to exist, and that there's no such thing as an ongoing hell. The thing that drove him to that decision, he says, is basically he found the emotions of believing in the reality of hell intolerable. He said he can't see how Christians can handle it. They either have to stuff their emotions, cut 'em off and become unemotional, just flat-lined in their hearts, or they crack up. How, emotionally, do you handle the reality of hell?

Fortunately, the scriptures have given us an example of a person who did engage in that reality with His emotions, and gave us a pattern on how we can live as people who actually believe in the reality of hell, with integrity in our emotions. It's found in the book of Romans, chapters 9 and 10. I'm gonna put a couple verses up here, and I'd encourage you to find the text if it's hard to read in here, so I'm puttin' most everything up here on the overhead. But Romans chapters 9 and 10—let me set the stage for you just a moment. The Apostle Paul is writing some really profound theology here. Chapters...Romans chapters 9, 10, and 11 are probably some of the deepest theological writings in all the New Testament. There is demanding logic when you go through this section. It is precision teaching. When you read through here it is like watching a master chess game, and every move that Paul makes is calculated and interlinked to prove a point as he goes through these three chapters. And it's just the type of place where you would tend to become very intellectual, very focused, and emotions would tend to be out of the picture because you're thinking with such precision and building such an argument, and such a tightly woven understanding of things. And yet, in the middle of it, Paul is very emotional, and that's what strikes me about this section. He's wrestling with the reality that many of his loved ones, his people among the Jewish faith, are headed for hell. They're lost. And he's trying to sort that out intellectually, and as he does so he shows us how to handle it emotionally.

In chapter 9 verse 2 he will make this statement here. He leads into it this way. He says, 'I tell the truth; I'm clear with my conscience before the Holy Spirit,' he says. 'I am really telling things true here.' He says

I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart.

That's the Apostle Paul. He doesn't disengage from this emotionally. He doesn't turn into a cold theologian that's gonna put together the logic sequence. And neither does he hide from the realities he's talking about. He says, 'You know what? I have great sorrow. I have unceasing grief in my heart over my brethren, my kinsmen.' He says...he goes on and says, 'I wish I could be accursed. I wish I could be destined to hell if they could be saved.' We tend to try to make Christianity so one-dimensional emotionally—if you're a Christian you ought to be happy...happy all the day, every day. If you're a Christian and you're feeling sad, and you're feeling sorrow, and you're feeling grief, then there's probably something wrong. You need to rethink things, and you need to get backed up again, and you need to be positive and confident and rejoicing.

You can say, if you're a Christian, yes, there's times you should be feeling joy; and you should be rejoicing. And Paul was such a person. But there's also times, as a Christian, that you should feel grief and sorrow. And if you don't...if you don't, you're not yet gripping everything Jesus taught. Christianity is not a one-note, emotionally, on the keyboard. It's a rich combination of notes forming a chord that resonates deep; and it is sorrow, and it is grief, and it is hope, and it is fear, and it all comes together in such a way that God weaves it together and there's a richness of the emotional life of a Christian. And if we take some element of it and say that doesn't belong, we're missing it. But you engage in this emotion...you don't run from it. There should be great sorrow, and there should be unceasing grief when you have loved ones that reject the rule of Jesus in their lives. That won't be your only emotion, because there'll be joy, and hope, and peace, and other emotions. But this will be one of 'em.

What do you do with that emotion as you engage it? Later in this chapter it's kind of like a book end, actually, the start of chapter 10. He'll come back to the emotional element and he'll say this...

My heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation.

Underscore—he says "My desire." 'I really want them to be saved. That's my heartbeat.' And he follows up with that and says, 'and my prayer to God.' You take that emotion—that grief, that sorrow, that desire for their wellbeing, and their salvation, and you turn it into earnest prayer. You cry out to God. Two things happen. One—God will be able to minister to your soul in such a way that there's a peace. It's a promise Paul makes when we go to our God in prayer, that the peace of Christ will guard over our hearts. It'll keep us from sinking into despair. God will be there with you in that prayer, and there'll be a peace. But secondly, there'll be an effectiveness. God

responds to earnest prayer. And God will respond to your prayers. He will work grace in the lives of those you pray for. It'll be between them and God, but He will work in their lives, and you pray He'll work for their salvation.

Now we're ready for the tradition. If Jesus is gonna be center to our life, then we have to be a people who live as those who actually believe in the reality of hell. That is a simple logic sequence when we say we believe in Jesus. Number two, because of that we will be careful in our walk with God, and our words about God in our sphere of influence. And third, we will be a people who take our sorrow and our grief for our loved ones, our family, our community, and other peoples to God in prayer. The thing that helps me sustain all that is what we're gonna do right now.

The tradition Jesus gave the night in which He was betrayed, and He called His disciples to remember Him, and remember Him in a very specific way, as the One who died for us. And He gave them bread, and He broke it, and they ate it; and as they ate it He said, "Remember My body which is broken for you." And then He gave them a cup, and they shared it, and He said, "Drink this in remembrance of Me," the blood of the covenant, His blood, shed for us. Every time I come to Communion, every time I come to that remembrance of Jesus as the One who died for us, I remember why I trust Him, and I'm renewed in my conviction to follow Him carefully and speak of Him accurately; and my heart is engaged to care like He cares...the One who loved us so much that He went to the cross so that none of us would ever have to go to hell. We want to remember Him in such a way that we are a people who are able to go out of here with hearts engaged, diligent in the practice and convinced of the realities He spoke of, and we can be a people of witness in this community.

Our Father in heaven,

We come before You to do what Jesus asked us to do in simple obedience, to remember Him as the One who died for us. Father, we pray that as we do this You would renew our trust in Him and His words, You would call us to a new diligence in our walk with You and our words of You. Father, above all we pray that You would engage our hearts to care as He cared—for You, for one another, and for those around us, Father. We pray with thanks for such a Savior, and the wonder and the mystery that You, Father, through Him, have opened up the gates of Your kingdom wide for all who would enter in. Father, we thank You for that. Renew us in remembrance of Him.

In Jesus' name, amen.

[Congregation shares in Communion, and then is dismissed.]