

4. Is Hell a REAL Place?

Insights into Eternity

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Hell: A Subject Not to be Avoided

Today, we tackle a topic that is often avoided by pastors and teachers, one that many of us would prefer to dodge if possible: the subject of Hell. A story recounts C. S. Lewis listening to a young preacher's sermon about God's judgment on sin. At the end of his message, the young man declared, "If you do not accept Christ as Savior, you will face severe eschatological consequences!" After the service, Lewis asked, "Are you saying that someone who does not believe in Christ will go to Hell?" "Exactly," the young man replied. "Then state it clearly," Lewis responded. Although we may feel uneasy studying it, the subject is important to all of us.

Some might ask, "Can't we just avoid the topic of Hell?" Charles Spurgeon, the renowned English preacher, once remarked, "Think lightly of Hell, and you will think lightly of the Cross. Think little of the sufferings of lost souls, and you will soon think little of the Savior who delivers you from them." Many people shy away from discussing Hell because they prefer to view death as the end when it is merely the beginning. We will better appreciate what Jesus accomplished for us on the Cross when we consider where we were headed before coming to Christ.

Near-Death Experiences of Hell

As previously mentioned in this series, there is significant interest today in the topic of life after death and near-death experiences. It is easy to find a book on the subject. In the first study of this series, we explored the book by Dr. Raymond A. Moody, *Life After Life*, which examines the experiences of 150 people who underwent Near-Death Experiences (NDEs). Another doctor, Dr. Maurice Rawlings, in his book *To Hell and Back*, also researching NDEs, reports that some individuals encountered Hell but had those memories repressed within a few days. He stated that, as a rule, people tend to remember positive experiences while forgetting the negative ones. Thus, if the interview is delayed even slightly—days, weeks, or months later—people typically recall only the positive experiences.

Dr. Rawlings recounts performing CPR on a patient with a pacemaker who was near death. The patient kept regaining consciousness, pleading with Dr. Rawlings to pray for him as he cried out, claiming he was in Hell. Although Dr. Rawlings hesitated to pray for the man because he wasn't a believer himself, he eventually offered a prayer due to the man's distress, asking Jesus Christ to keep him out of Hell. The man immediately calmed down and stopped screaming. Dr. Rawlings notes that this incident profoundly impacted him, leading him to give his life to Christ. He is neither a theologian nor a minister; rather, he is a dedicated doctor who documented the experiences of patients he resuscitated.

Many people claim to have had near-death experiences, but there is no way to know which ones are valid. It is reasonable to assume that if God caught Paul up into the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2), and if Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father before he died (Acts 7:56), then there may be those today who have been allowed to glimpse what lies beyond this life. Some

would have us believe that everyone, regardless of their beliefs or lifestyle choices, will be welcomed by the brilliant light and ushered into a peaceful eternity. However, this does not align with Scripture. Satan seeks to counterfeit true accounts and deceive some into believing that all roads lead to God. Some near-death experiences may glorify God and could be true, but our faith must rest on what God has spoken in His Word.

Our mission as Christians is to rescue people from Satan's control so they will not be separated from God and sent to a place known as Hell. Every person is deeply loved by God, who does not wish for anyone to perish but for everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). But what if they don't? What if they die without knowing Christ? What if they remain unresponsive to God's message of love and good news? At the Second Coming of Christ, He will separate the sheep (believers) from the goats (non-believers), and Jesus stated twice that the punishment would be for eternity:

Is Death the State of Annihilation?

Some argue that Hell is where a person who rejects God's free pardon for sin faces annihilation. The term annihilation means "to reduce to utter ruin or nonexistence; to destroy utterly." Again, we must look closely at what Jesus said:

⁴¹Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴²For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' ⁴⁴"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' ⁴⁵"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' ⁴⁶"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life (Matthew 25:41-46, emphasis added).

Jesus used the same Greek word twice in the passage above to describe eternal fire and eternal punishment (vv. 41 & 46) and once to describe the eternal bliss of His followers (v. 46). The Greek word *aiōnios* means "Eternal, perpetual. When referring to eternal life, it signifies the life which is God's and, therefore, not bound by the limitations of time." That doesn't suggest annihilation. It is Jesus' clear teaching that anyone who rejects the Gospel and persists in sin will experience eternal punishment at the end of their life.

Svetlana Stalin, the daughter of Josef Stalin, who led Russia from 1922 to 1953, was at her father's side as he approached death. She declared she would never again sit beside an unbeliever who was dying, stating that he went into Hell kicking and screaming. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). Voltaire was reported to have died crying out in torment, as were King Charles IX of France, David Hume, and Thomas Paine. C.M. Ward, speaking for those who truly know God, said, "No Christian has ever been known to recant on his deathbed."

Many of us have wondered: “Why would a loving God send someone to Hell?” How bad must a person be to be sent there? Is there a sin that counts as one too many?

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son (John 3:16-18, emphasis added).

The Creator God has established the way to salvation. The reality is that the entire human race has fallen short of God's ideal for living. None of us can claim we have never sinned. If you have sinned even once, it is enough to make you a sinner. We all suffer from the same affliction. Sin eternally separates us from God. James expresses it this way: “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it” (James 2:10). If there had been another way for God to get you to heaven, apart from sending His Son to die a cruel and torturous death, wouldn't you think God would have chosen it? God has granted humanity the gift of free will, but His justice requires that rebellion be penalized. A holy God cannot permit sin in His presence: “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing” (Habakkuk 1:13). Therefore, God honors the choice made by a rebel who refuses to repent.

In God's love for humanity, He initiated a rescue plan. The Son of God took on human form and became a substitute to take the place of guilty mankind, bearing the punishment Himself. In this way, His justice is satisfied, allowing Him to reach out in love to save all who turn to Him and walk in obedience to the Gospel.

But what if a person has never heard the Gospel? In this case, we must trust in the goodness of God and His ability to know the heart of everyone. We do not know what goes through a person's mind in their final moments crossing from the earthly realm to the next, but we know that Scripture urges us to respond when His Spirit convicts our hearts: For he says, “In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.” I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2). I personally believe that God will judge every person based on the light they have received. We cannot know the fate of a soul; only God can know that. But it is our solemn duty to testify to others about the way of salvation, just as a person witnessing a drowning individual would have a duty to throw that person a lifeline or bring them to shore.

Who Are Those Sent to Hell?

But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death (Revelation 21:8, emphasis added).

I am uncertain whether the lake is a literal lake of fire or if it represents a figurative state of being. We cannot know for sure, but what we do know about the lake of fire is that it is a place filled with torment and destruction. The Bible describes Hell as a realm of eternal darkness (Jude 1:13). We

have a choice to be consumed by the Light or by the Darkness. We will embrace one or the other for eternity.

The path to God begins with recognizing our need for a Savior. The apostle Paul expressed it this way: “There is no one righteous, not even one...there is no one who does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10-12). Paul asserts that no one will be declared righteous by adhering to a system of works (the law, verse 20). He explains that righteousness apart from the law has been revealed, specifically the substitutionary death of Christ for us in our place. This righteousness is granted to us when we repent (turn away from sin and turn to Christ) and accept Jesus Christ to take residence in the throne room of our lives. The gift of God's righteousness is the only escape from a place of torment (Acts 4:12). When we respond to the Gospel, our names are written in the Book of Life (Revelation 21:27), which records all who surrender their lives to Christ. It is a dreadful fate for those who realize their name is not in the Book of Life:

And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14-15).

The Unsaved Will Be Judged According to the Light They Have Received.

Chuck Swindoll shares insights about the varying degrees of punishment in Hell:

There will always be some who will not have as much divine input as others. Because that is true, I believe there will be degrees of eternal punishment. Look closely at the words of Jesus:

⁴⁷That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. ⁴⁸But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked (Luke 12:47-48).

Let's understand that no one without Christ spends eternity in heaven. But the *specifics* of how God handles those without Christ because they heard so little might very well be answered by the idea of degrees of punishment. But we do know for sure that heaven will not be their home.¹

The greater the influence one has, the greater the accountability and responsibility that comes with it. Don't be too quick to embrace positions of influence over others. As a person's influence rises, so too does their level of accountability:

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly (James 3:1).

¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Growing Deep in the Christian Life*, Published by Multnomah Press, 1987. Page 324.

Every Christian holds a position of influence, especially if they are known in their neighborhood or workplace as a believer in Christ. People are observing how you live your life. Their eternity often depends on their response to the message of Christ as seen through what you say and do. It stands to reason that, just as there are different levels of reward for the righteous, there would also be varying levels of punishment for those in Hell.

Let's consider what Jesus taught about two individuals who died and where they ended up in eternity. The Lord does not indicate that this is a parable. It is also notable that one of the two is named Lazarus, which is unusual for a parable. This writer believes that Jesus is conveying a situation that is real.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

¹⁹There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²²"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him *to Abraham's side*. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³*In Hell*, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' ²⁵"But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us (Luke 16:19-26, emphasis added).

While they are on Earth, how are the Rich man and Lazarus described? How do you think the lives of the two men were celebrated upon both of their deaths?

Before we explore the passage, it may be useful to examine what the Bible teaches about where the spirits and souls of these two men went when they died. Hell and Abraham's side describe the two disembodied states in which these men found themselves. The Greek word Hades (Sheol in the Old Testament) is translated as Hell. Hades appears ten times in the New Testament. Jesus told us that while His body was in the tomb, He would be in the heart of the Earth:

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the Earth (Matthew 12:40).

When Christ died, He went to a place located at the heart of the Earth. The apostle Paul also wrote about the realm of departed spirits, stating it was found beneath the Earth's surface: "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on Earth and under the Earth" (Philippians 2:10). Many believe that Hades is a spiritual, not a physical place within the Earth, consisting of two distinct compartments. One side, named after the father of the faithful, is referred to as Abraham's side (NIV) or Abraham's bosom (KJV), symbolizing closeness to Abraham. Another term for the righteous side is paradise. Jesus used this term when He spoke to the believing thief crucified beside Him: "Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in

paradise” (Luke 23:43). This paradise could not be heaven because Jesus, on the day of His resurrection, told Mary Magdalene: “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father” (John 20:17). These Scriptures also confirm that when Christ died, His spirit descended to Hades, where He took the keys of death and Hell (Hades) from Satan (Revelation 1:18). Jesus then crossed over to the paradise side of the underworld, releasing those whose trust was in God from the righteous side, also known as Abraham's side, where they were kept in the heart of the Earth. “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). Jesus was the first to conquer death and could enter heaven due to the victory of His substitutionary death on the cross.

The passage in Luke 16 offers a glimpse into the events occurring in Hades during the time Jesus spoke, presenting a true story about the fates of two very different men and their destinations after death. This passage mentions the names of Lazarus and Abraham, and in some manuscripts (such as The Vulgate), the rich man is referred to as Dives, which is the Latin term for rich.

The Situation of the Two Men While Living (verses 19-21).

This rich man is described as wearing the Prada and Armani clothes of his day—purple and fine linen clothes. This affluent man lived lavishly every day, indulging in the finest foods and wines, residing in the grandest mansion in town. It’s not an exaggeration to assume that he was widely recognized as someone to be envied and was a prominent figure of his time.

Lazarus was laid at the rich man’s gate or porch. The Greek word translated as “laid” is *ballo*, which means to throw out with force. He had been roughly flung there, and it seems he was simply left to lie there, life slowly ebbing away from him. The gate where they threw Lazarus was likely the rear servant's entrance, where the servants discarded rubbish and where the dogs gathered to lick his ulcerated skin (v. 21). It was clear that Lazarus was very ill, as he was covered in ulcerated sores. He was probably too sick to go anywhere other than the spot where he was thrown to beg for scraps of food that fell from the rich man's table. The image Jesus portrays is of a man too weak from sickness and hunger to fend off the dogs and unable to help himself.

The Condition of the Two Men in Eternity (Verses 22-26)

No burial or funeral took place for Lazarus at his death. It is likely that if no one cared for him while he was alive, his death was no different. Scripture speaks loudly in its silence on this subject. In contrast, the rich man was buried, probably in a lavish ceremony with public mourning. Of course, the rich man couldn’t care less once he died. He was quite surprised to find himself in Hell. While living at the rich man's gate, no one likely knew the name of Lazarus, but everyone knew the name of the rich man. On the other side of Death’s door, however, things are turned around; everyone knows the name of Lazarus. As for the rich man, his name is not known, and he’s a nobody. How sad it is that many who believe death is annihilation will find themselves very conscious upon entering eternity through death's door.

Some say that when death comes, the real you—your spirit—will enter a state of soul sleep where nothing is experienced, and consciousness ceases. What do you see in this passage that conveys a different message?

One of the first things the rich man faces is utter torment (v. 23). The Greek word used is "basanos," which translates to "going to the bottom, the lowest torture or torment." This Greek term might describe what we discussed earlier, namely that there are different levels of suffering in Hell, and the deepest level of torment is what this man is experiencing (present tense, as he is still there today). His tongue burns, and he longs for water to cool it. Although he lacks a physical body, he still experiences a sense of touch and is in excruciating pain. He also has a sense of sight and recognition, for he saw Lazarus across a vast chasm with Abraham by his side. How painful it is to see paradise, yet knowing it is too late, he will never experience even a moment there.

Later, at the Great White Throne Judgment found in Revelation 20:11-15, we read that death and Hades will be thrown into the Lake of Fire, resulting in eternal darkness. From that point onward, the former rich man will no longer be able to see anything. He retains the ability to speak; he calls to Abraham and expresses his pain. It appears there is no change in his attitude toward Lazarus, as he still believes he can command Lazarus to fetch water for him and visit his brothers (v. 24). His appeal to Abraham is somewhat manipulative. He addresses him as Father Abraham, suggesting that he has a relationship with him because he was born into a nation of faith in God. How deceived he is! Like those born in Christian countries who label themselves Christian yet lack a true relationship with God through Christ. He still possesses the ability to hear; he can listen to Abraham speaking to him.

Abraham then answered the rich man, speaking words that would stay with him for all eternity. He will remember his life (v. 25) on Earth and all the opportunities he missed to repent and dedicate his life to God. How painful that will be! The mind will be very clear; our faculties will remain with us, perhaps even more so in eternity. There will be significant regret for worthless deeds, combined with an inability to correct them, for it will be too late. The former rich man has no one to pray him out of this situation; it is a deception from Satan to believe you can change your fate after death. His location was fixed, and a chasm separated them, preventing anyone from crossing (v. 26). Where death finds you, eternity confines you. According to what we see in Scripture, there is no purgatory, no reincarnation, and no possibility of relief. The time to change your eternal destiny is before you die before it is too late.

Does a person's financial state and status in this life have anything to do with their eternal destiny? Does a poor person enter heaven simply on the basis that they are poor? If not, then what sin led the rich man to hell?

What Sin Led the Ex-Rich Man to Hell?

There are numerous sins that the rich man may have committed, but his main sin was that he was quite content without God. His life was one in which he felt no need. He paid no attention to anything but his pleasure and comfort. It's possible that he never noticed or cared about Lazarus, which would have amplified his condemnation. He had the ability to help Lazarus, but instead, he left him to suffer and die. He believed it was perfectly normal and natural for Lazarus to wallow in pain while he indulged in a life of luxury. He looked at a fellow man, hungry and in pain, and did nothing about it. Lazarus was discontent on Earth without God, sought Him out in his need,

and found Him merciful and gracious. The rich man felt no need. Both were born into the world needing forgiveness and a relationship with the author of life:

Throughout our life on Earth, God presents opportunities to seek the path to His home. This is the universal need of every person on Earth—to find God. After death, God honors the choices we make during our lives. If we choose to live without God on Earth, He will grant our wishes for eternity. If you go through life without considering God or eternity, reach out to Him now while you can still experience His grace. Why wait another second? Undoubtedly, your spiritual adversary, the devil, will attempt to convince you to postpone this message for another day, but Christ waits for you with open arms.

A Plea for the Living (verses 27-31).

²⁷"He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, ²⁸for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' ²⁹"Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' ³⁰" 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' ³¹"He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead' (Luke 16:27-31).

Why was the former wealthy man so concerned about his brothers still on Earth? He prayed twice while in Hell. The first prayer was for water; the second was for his brothers on Earth. God denied both requests. The man was unfaithful to his responsibilities toward those around him, particularly his brothers. He presented his brothers with an example of a man who was content without God. Now that he was in Hell, he realized that his brothers were living according to the model he provided them, namely, a contented life devoid of God. The one thing that can intensify agony for a person in Hell is being forever trapped with those whom you helped lead there. As we have mentioned, each of us influences others for better or for worse. Let us commit ourselves to being faithful to those who model their lives after us: our brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, and close relatives. We must live wholeheartedly for Christ. Other lives depend on it.

Why did Abraham refuse to send a messenger to the rich man's brothers? The former rich man and his brothers had the Word of God (at that time, they had the writings of Moses and the prophets). That is all the witness people need. If they do not believe God's Words, they will not believe, even if someone should return from the dead. God's written Word is the most crucial evidence one can examine to prepare for life in eternity. Ignoring it poses a great danger to one's eternal life beyond the grave.

What are the main take-home lessons that this passage teaches us?

1. One of the most important lessons is that the time to seek the Lord is now, not later.
2. Secondly, our actions have consequences that may not always be felt on Earth, but they follow us into eternity.
3. Another lesson is that we influence others more than we realize.
4. Fourth, God's Word serves as the most critical evidence for preparing for eternal life.

5. The fifth lesson is that, regardless of our economic position in this world, if we don't have Christ, we don't have eternal life with God (1 John 5:12).

Prayer: Father, thank You for clearly showing us in Your Word what we must do to prepare for eternity. I ask that everyone who lacks confidence in their eternal destiny pray and seek You until they find eternal life in Christ. Let none of us be content in life without You. Help us as we reach out to those who do not know Christ so that we may guide them from the Kingdom of Darkness into Your Kingdom of Light. Amen.

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