

February 3, 2013 – Epiphany 4 – Sermon Series, “Questioning Faith”

When I hear that passage from 1 Corinthians, I keep expecting to see a bride at the back of the church. Which is somewhat strange in itself, just because 1 Corinthians is really about living in Christian community, not about romantic love.

But what might seem really strange today is that the question we’re addressing is **the question of hell**. We have God appointing the young Jeremiah as a prophet; we have God as our strong rock, our castle, our hope in the Psalm; we have Paul’s beautiful treatise on love in his letter to the Corinthians, and then we have an odd story about Jesus that at first sounds like a sort of disjointed stories. But not much about hell. But there is a relationship, and I’ll get back to that. But meanwhile, we’re going to take a whirlwind look at the question of hell.

Since we have our annual meeting after the service, I want to keep this as short as possible, but it’s another complicated subject that could warrant a whole sermon series itself. So we will do what we can; at least I can present to you some views on the topic, and let you mull them over for yourselves.

According to a 2004 Gallup poll, almost three out of four Americans believe in hell, but belief is highest among people who attend church: among those who attend church weekly it’s about 92%, and it goes down to 74%, slightly higher than the national average, for people who attend nearly weekly.

You’d think it would be a fairly simple topic – one reason 92% of regular churchgoers believe in hell is that we’ve been taught that many passages in the Bible describe eternal punishment in a fiery pit. But the Bible isn’t nearly as clear as that, and hell as most people believe in it is more an invention of Christian **tradition** than it is Christian **scripture**.

The idea of hell is virtually absent from the Old Testament. There’s a line from Daniel that says “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt,” and at Isaiah 66:24 we hear, “And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.” But many more verses in various books of the older

testament indicate pure nothingness – not hell, not heaven, not anything in particular.

In the New Testament, there's no systematic description or presentation of hell: death and destruction are mentioned for those rejecting God, and there are a number of verses that mention "the hell of fire," "him who can destroy both body and soul in hell," a "furnace of fire," "outer darkness," and a fiery lake. But none of them come even close to describing hell in the detail we've come to know and assume is somewhere in the Bible.

The poet Dante was probably the first to really scare the pants off people with his long poem, *The Inferno*, which has an inscription "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here" over the gates of his hell, which is The preacher Jonathan Edwards had people fainting and screaming in fear when he preached about hell in his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." He said things like, "It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God for one moment; but you must suffer it for all eternity."

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Old Testament verses: Daniel 12:2 “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” And Isaiah 66:24: “And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh”

New Testament verses:

Matthew 5:22 “²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.

Matthew 5:29 “²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” (See parallel at Mark 9:44)

Matthew 10:28 Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Matthew 13:40-42 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, . . . angels . . . will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew 25:30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Also: Matthew 25:41; James 3:6; Rev 20:13-15; Rev. 21:8

Arguments For An Eternal Hell

Among the common arguments advanced for the existence of an eternal hell are these:

1. Words and pictures in the New Testament imply finality.
2. The doctrine of hell has been believed for a long time by eminent theologians.
3. Offers of pardon are restricted to the present world.
4. The judgment occurs at the close of the redemptive era, and hence is final.

5. Character tends to final permanence.

6. The conscience expects and demands retribution in another life.

Arguments Against An Eternal Hell

Commonly presented arguments against the existence of an eternal hell include:

1. Words and pictures in the New Testament imply death and destruction (i.e., annihilation).
2. "Eternal punishment" can refer to results that are eternal, not an eternal process.
3. Vindictive justice is not compatible with the God of love and compassion revealed in the New Testament.
4. The punishment does not fit the crime (i.e. non-eternal sin and disbelief).
5. Hell contradicts the Christian assertion of the final victory of God over evil

Possibilities:

1. The traditional concept of hell, where people go for eternity and suffer excruciating pain for all time.
2. God is fire (as seen in Deut 4:24; Ezek 1:27, 8:2; Heb 12:29; Dan 7:10; Exod. 3:2-3, 13:21-22; Isa. 30:27, 33; Rev. 2:18; Deut 4:36; Isa 65:5; Jer 23:29; Zech 2:5; Ezek 1:4, 13-14; Dan. 7:9-11; Rev. 1:14-15, 4:5; Mal. 3:2-3, 4:1). Baker makes the argument that God is a “consuming and devouring fire” as seen in the burning bush, the pillar of fire, a purifying fire as seen in Malachi); both the righteous and the “less-righteous” (my term), when facing God, are subject to a purifying fire. Confronted with the majesty, power, and compassionate love, most people will repent of their sins and be purified by this “eternal fire,” although there is a distinct possibility that some people will still refuse God, or that for some others (think, Hitler), there is *nothing remaining* after that purification, and they are simply annihilated (primarily from

Razing Hell, by Sharon Baker).

3. Heaven and hell are eternal states; every human being has eternal life. But people would go crazy having to experience eternity with all the flaws and fears and unkindness, etc., in the hearts of human beings, if they had to live that way for eternity; Benjamin Kuipers, raised Calvinist and now Quaker, but influenced by both, suggests that we are given this time as human beings as a sort of practice for heaven; here, we learn Godly ways and develop a desire to be righteous, God-loving people. God thus “teaches us survival skills for eternal life,” and in our eternity of heaven we might pass someone whose eternity is hell. Eternity is thus either a continual growing in traits like love, humility, forgiveness, faith, hope, charity, curiosity, humor, and surely many others. Characteristics like hatred, resentment, pride, envy, sloth, and so on, experienced over eternity, are the ingredients of a person's self-created Hell.”

3. “Love Wins,” Rob Bell’s book, is countered by “God Wins,” but from reviews I’ve read, not even “God Wins” explains how the loving God described through scriptures can synch with a God who allows someone who makes terrible mistakes for 20 or 50 or 90 years would be consigned to eternal torment. Bell suggests that God’s loving nature would not allow anyone to suffer for all eternity. Thus, “love wins.”

Question: What do you believe???