

Hell

Luke 16:19-31 RSV

by Doug Sterrett

"There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Laz'arus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Laz'arus in his bosom. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Laz'arus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Laz'arus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.'"

While visiting Iceland Carl Steinman was so fascinated by its volcanoes that he ignored the advice of his guide and walked over to very edge of the active crater on Mount Hecla. His curiosity lead him to the very edge of the cauldron and as he eagerly leaned forward to look into the great pit the mountain grumbled and quaked and Steinman was thrown into the crater. As he fell his feet caught in some blocks of hardened lava leaving him hanging over the yawning gulf filled with hot lava. He wrote:

"Oh, the horrors of that awful realization! There, over the mouth of a black and heated abyss, I was held suspended, a helpless and conscious prisoner, to be hurled downward by the next great throe of trembling nature! 'Help! Help! Help! --for the love of God, help! ' I shrieked, in the very agony of my despair. I had nothing to rely upon but the mercy of heaven, and I prayed to God as I had never prayed before, for the forgiveness of sins, that they might not follow me to judgment." He felt like the rich man in Hell in our text today.

As the mountain continued to shake rocks tumbled down the sides of the crater near him and rolled into the seething caldron below. Fortunately, the guide heard his terrified pleas and at great risk to himself, scrambled to rescue him, shouting, "I warned you!"

"You did," cried Steinman, "but forgive me, and save me, for I am perishing! "¹ Carl Steinman came away from that experience knowing that a merciful and loving God had wrenched him away from the very jaws of Hell.

“Hell!” It’s a word you and I hear almost every day. It comes lightly, even jokingly to the lips of many people, yet for several decades it has been a word seldom mentioned in mainline American churches. Consequently most of us know little about the Biblical teaching about Hell. So, this morning it is my avowed purpose to let the truth of the Gospel scare Hell out you, because if you do not understand Hell you cannot understand the meaning of the resurrection and the full extent of Christ’s love.

Begin by thinking of Noah--yes, the man of God who, at God’s command, built a massive ark in a place where the mighty boat could never float. Noah opened the door to that ark, brought in two of every animal on earth, brought in his own family and waited seven days. There was no reason to follow Noah into that boat unless you believed the Word of God he preached. Everyone scoffed at him. Finally, old Noah shut the great doors to the ark and it was too late for anyone else to enter. The rains began and the great flood came. Everyone else drowned. God provided a door to salvation, but the people had to pass through it to be saved. **Make no mistake. There is no other means of salvation than through Jesus Christ.** If that offends the Moslems, Bahai’s, Buddhists, Hindu’s or others, so be it! For Jesus said in John 14:6 NIV, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* The alternative, according to the Word of God is Hell.

So what is Hell? Is it a concept, a myth, a place or a symbol? Is it simply a mechanism used in ancient times to scare people into following Christ? What do we know about it?

The Word of God teaches that it will be a place of **insecurity and fear.** John wrote in Revelation 20: 1 *

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

That Abyss — in Greek it means bottomless pit — was a wide hole where a person would keep falling, tumbling out of control forever. Fear of falling is one of our basic instincts and so it represents the ultimate in insecurity and fear. A person consigned to Hell will fall forever in a state of everlasting terror .

God also teaches that it will be a **place of eternal darkness.** Jude 13 * says about people who go to hell: “They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.” Again, we not only learn that it will be a place without light, but this verse reiterates the fact that it will be a place of insecurity where one wanders wildly like stars out of control or waves in the sea.

Jesus tells us that Hell will be a place of physical agony, mental suffering, and emotional sorrow. Matthew 13:50 * Listen! He says,

Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The message is much the same in Revelation 20: 11-15.

“Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire

In both passages we get a clear view of judgment day when those who put their faith in Christ will be separated from those who do not. Those who do not follow Him are depicted as being wicked and the angels will throw them into the fiery furnace, a place of eternal physical agony, mental suffering and emotional sorrow. Here we must realize that while it will be fiery hot and agonizing the light we normally associate with fire will be absent for we have already learned that it will be a place of darkness. Thus, the person in hell will fall forever downward through a dark, hot bottomless pit. And as he or she falls the unfortunate person will be in physical, mental and emotional agony. And, it goes without saying that if you are falling and in agony Hell will be a place of instability. It also follows that if it is a place of darkness, completely without light where each terrified person’s focus is turned inward upon his or her own agony it will be a place of terrible loneliness.

And, above all else Hell will be a place of eternal separation from God. Mat. 7:21-23 *

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers!’”

No one on earth, no matter how wicked, has ever been truly separated from God. He has loved us all equally and has always stood beside and even carried

us, even when we were unaware of His eternal presence. But, when He says, *"Away from me, you evildoers!"* That person will be tossed into the Abyss and will be forever separated from God. The door will be shut just as it was on the Ark. He will no longer be there to hold all things together, to sustain life. As you tumble through the eternal darkness you will be in a state of complete chaos, right along with Satan and his followers. That, my friends is the Biblical picture of Hell.

Now lets put it all together and imagine, with writer John Thomas, what Hell will be like for the person who has just been thrown into the Abyss. It could be a neighbor, relative, co-worker, or friend. After a roar of physical pain blasts your friend, his first moments are spent wailing and gritting his teeth. Then after a time, accepting the pain, he begins to think, and instinctively looks about. Blackness surrounds him.

In life he had grown to expect some glow of light as his eyes grew accustomed to darkness, something that would give definition to things around him. He blinks and strains, trying to focus, but sees only impenetrable darkness--unyielding, smothering, oppressing blackness. And as he realizes that it will not go away he reaches out with his hands, his feet, trying to feel something solid. He wants the stability of a chair, solid ground, a rock, a tree, anything. There is nothing. He kicks, screams, lunges and twists until he is too exhausted to move. There he is --alone in his pain, his sobs choked by the darkness --lost in the roar of Hell.

After a time he begins to think again. On earth he always had hope. He could always find a way out. Suddenly, the awful truth spreads out before him, "When I put in ten thousand centuries of time here, I will not have accomplished one thing. I will not have one second less to spend here." His torment goes on forever and ever. He is conscious but this is not life. It is Hell.²

God doesn't send anyone to hell. You send yourself when you refuse His gracious offer of salvation. If you refuse to believe, you will perish. You will go to hell. The choice is yours. Today, right now, ask Jesus into your heart and put your faith in Him alone for your salvation. He is the door to the sheep fold, the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him. Hell is so terrible, so final, so hopeless that after trusting Jesus for our own salvation we must warn our friends, neighbors and loved ones. Like Carl Steinman's guide you and I must take the risk to rescue them from the edge of Hell.

¹ D. L. Moody, [Prevailing Prayer](#), Chicago Moody Press. p 81; reported in Robert J. Morgan, [Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations & Quotes](#), Nashville Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000, p 433.

Appreciation: I am indebted to Ann Graham Lotz, who provided the points made in this sermon in her book, [Just Give Me Jesus](#), Nashville: Word Pub. 2000, p 84-85.

² John Thomas, "That Hideous Doctrine," *Moody*, September 1985,91-92 as quoted in Robert J. Morgan, p 432.