

WHAT IS HELL?

(Tommie Fiddlepants Burns Yet in Hell)

Questions from the Floor II (third sermon in the series)

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Now and then people ask me why I don't title my sermons. Earlier this week, I opened the bulletin and saw these words, "What is Hell?" "Casey Thompson preaching."

Now you know.

To add insult to injury, this morning I noticed as we were singing "God of Grace and God of Glory" that we sang a little louder when we came to the line, "Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour." Hmmm.

But enough of this prologue. To your question, "What is hell?" and to our text: Mark 9:42–48. Listen for a word from God.

If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

The Word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Typically, when we want to ferret out something from biblical antecedents, we must spend some time deconstructing later additions to the concept. So, I decided we should start this sermon with a look at that great American theologian of hell, Charlie Daniels of the Charlie Daniels' band, whose hit "Devil went down to Georgia" contains most of what Americans know about this topic. There's Satan and trickery, there's a fiddle made of gold, there's chicken in the bread pan pickin' out dough (that part's not biblical), and then there's everlasting torment for those who shirked their fiddle lessons, for those who have strayed away from the path of God—they have been punished. Wanting to know more, I did some more poking around and was surprised to discover that Charlie Daniel's major opus on this topic was itself derivative—based on a piece of folklore known by several different names, including, "Olde Nick Hath A Mandolin Fine," "The Lute of the Damned" and, my favorite, "Tommie Fiddlepants Burns Yet In Hell" which tells me that our older brothers and sisters in the faith had a more profound respect for the principalities and powers than to think you could fiddle your way out of damnation.

Now, you might be surprised to learn that almost none of this is biblical. Also, not biblical: little red suit and horns, pitchfork, circles of hell, purgatory, unusual punishments that allegorize your sins, and perhaps most surprisingly: eternal torment. Well, that one's up for debate. We can thank the wonderful imaginations of Dante and Milton for most of our images of hell—not scripture.

So, what does scripture say? Are you ready? It's complicated. I know. I'm sorry.

There are four words that have been translated as hell at one time or another in our scriptures. The first is a Hebrew word, Sheol. Sheol is the place of the dead, a holding tank if you will, for those who are both good or evil (though in some passages it seems mostly for the wicked). It doesn't seem to be a place of punishment, just a metaphor for the grave, a place where you presumably see people milling about waiting for something to happen, but nobody in Hebrew scripture really says what. They just sort of mill about, as if our spiritual ancestors expected something in the afterlife but had no idea what.

Hades is the second word, it's Greek. It also serves as the translation for Sheol when the Old Testament was translated. More milling about—though because the Greeks bequeathed it to us, we hear a good deal more about it from other folks like Homer and Josephus than we do with Sheol. Hades was in the belly of the earth, guarded by locks which only a few could open. Jesus is holding the keys to these locks in the first chapter of the revelation of John. It had different areas, most notable the fields of Elysium for the select righteous, and the dungeon of Tartarus for those less so. You start to see here the notion of reward and punishment which has become so closely intertwined with our view of heaven and hell, a notion we noted was foreign to the Old Testament.

The third word is Tartarus, that Greek dungeon. It is mentioned only once, in that gem of a Bible verse you hear read over and over, 2 Peter 2:4:

“For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into Tartarus and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment...”

And then there is the fourth word, the word that Jesus uses over and over to speak of hell, Gehenna. This is where we need to focus. This also happens to be where I have had some personal experience.

Ten years ago, I was riding in a bus outside of Jerusalem when the driver casually leaned over to me and said, “That's hell out there.”

“It looks quite lovely,” I said. “Is it a rough part of town?”

“No, that valley is the biblical hell.”

“Is this what you tell all the tourists? That's the Via Dolorosa, that's the upper room, that's the garden tomb, and over there, that's hell? There's not even a plaque on this one. I'm not buying it.”

“Seriously, that's the Valley of Hinnom. Gehenna? Don't you know anything about scripture?”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me.”

So, he patiently explained to me how the valley was once a garbage dump that continuously burned, a place to throw away refuse, to burn the corpses of animals and criminals, the valley where Roman troops slaughtered thousands of Jewish rebels and burned their bodies. The valley was full of flames, was difficult to breathe in, stank to the third heaven. In short, the valley was a by-word in Jesus’ time for all that was God-forsaken. Gehenna.

The location was not just a New Testament by-word either. In the old, you can find it under the name the Valley of Hinnom (in Hebrew, gai-hinnom... and thus gehenna). It is the stronghold for the worship of Molech and Ba’al, the place where the kings Ahaz and Manasseh sacrifice their children by fire to please a false God, one of the places Josiah cuts down so that a pure worship could be returned to Jerusalem, but the place always re-emerges, causing Jeremiah to curse it, uttering *these* words that will identify it with our notion of hell forevermore (selected verses Jer. 19):

Gehenna. “I am going to bring such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. ⁴ Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods ... because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent...to burn their children in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command ...

Sounds like hell, doesn’t it?

⁶ Therefore the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when this place shall no more be called ... the valley of the sons of Hinnom but the valley of Slaughter... I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth. ⁸ And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at; everyone who passes by it will be horrified ...

Jeremiah’s one of the all time great cursers...

⁹ And I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and all shall eat the flesh of their neighbors in the siege, and in the distress with which their enemies ... afflict them... they shall bury until there is no more room to bury.

Gehenna. Isaiah was pretty good at curses too. This is how he ends his entire work, with a nod to Hinnom as the faithful stream by to worship (Isaiah 66:23–24):

From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the LORD. 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.

That's Gehenna, hell on earth, the place of the unquenchable fire, where those who rebel against the kingdom of heaven have died, the place that Jesus uses as a metaphor for all that is unholy. Now, let's listen to his words again:

“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to Gehenna, to the unquenchable fire.^{2 44}
⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into Gehenna. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into Gehenna,⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.”

Now, I want you to stop and think for a moment. Gehenna is a real place, a horror of a place birthed by the worst parts of ourselves that we can't let go. What part of Ahaz or Manasseh was so warped by their love of power as king that they would protect it by the killing of their children? Stop and think because Gehenna isn't just a metaphor for a godless life—it's a real place—brought about by those who rebel against the kingdom of heaven. What warps the nation of Rome so much that they would kill multitudes of Israelites? Are the natural resources of a foreign nation worth destroying your own humanity? Stop and think. Because Gehenna is a real place and Jesus warns us that we love our own warpings so much that we would willingly place ourselves there rather than deal with our own dysfunctions.

So, stop and think. Gehenna is real. Have you been there? I have, a refugee camp for Palestinians displaced from their homes in Israel, generations of families living in single rooms, broken structures, people beset by disease and poverty that are impossible to imagine, because any number of people—both Israeli and Palestinian—needed to be right on a certain issue. Let the refugees be damned. Have you been there? I have, an outreach center in downtown Atlanta where men traded their dignity for subway tokens they could trade for drugs, because they were convicts now and nobody was going to hire them. Let the criminals be damned. Have you been there? I have, a hospital room where a young man was dying from his drunk driving because he'd rather self-medicate and act out than confront his father. Have you been there? I have, a public school room that has been forsaken by the citizens, but I've also been there in opulent homes, where the pain of a child has been quietly dispensed with because it's better if no one knows.

I ask you to stop and think because it is too too easy to foist Gehenna off into the future when it is such a reality now. Jesus warns us, “Do not make the foolish mistake of thinking your hand is more important than your soul. Your reputation more important than your son's life. Do not make the foolish mistake of thinking you aren't in danger now.” We've got to stop talking about hell as a place of punishment and start talking about it as a place of consequence—consequence for seeking the wrong things. Seek the kingdom of God, and all these other things we worry about will be added to us, but seek all these other things without respect for God and we find the kingdom of hell. That's the metaphor of Gehenna—and we imperil ourselves today if we only talk about it as something that belongs to the afterlife.

I should stop there—force us to think about the present reality, but this sermon series isn't 'Questions Casey wants to answer' but questions you want to ask, and I've I've dodge the three major questions you *really* want to know about hell. And they are about the afterlife. So, I'm going to cave and answer them. Does Tommie Fiddlepants burn yet in hell? If so, does he burn forever? And what if his name is Abdul Salim Fiddlepants?

Let's take them in reverse order:

Will our Muslim brothers and sisters be saved? Whenever Christians talk about people of other faiths—any faiths, not just Islam—someone inevitably turns to John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus says, "no one comes to the father except through me." And I think that's right. Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the father except through him. When I say this though, I mean to put the emphasis on Jesus. No one comes to the father except through *him*. That means the gift of salvation belongs to him *and no one else*. It is not mine to determine. It is not Pat Robertson's to determine. It is not even St. Paul's to determine. It belongs only to Christ and Christ is free to do what he will. And just look at him, he does whatever he wants, whenever he wants, and if he has sheep outside of this Christian fold, and he wants to save them, then Christ will save them. Will he? I don't know. I suspect he will, but he hasn't told me—and salvation belongs to him, not me.

Next question: Are the torments of hell eternal? In Matthew 10, Jesus says: "fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Which suggests an ending, not everlasting torment. Of course, I can offer you this one from Matthew 25, the social justice manifesto, "Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Of course, the word eternal there is tricky, doesn't necessarily mean 'everlasting.' I can not find a text which satisfies my curiosity completely. I think it is best to say, I don't know and refer it to the final question—which I hope renders these first two moot.

Finally, the ultimate question, does God consign people to hell in the afterlife? If we are simply to listen to the words of Christ, we hear language of the lost, language of eternal damnation, then the answer is yes. Scripture speak often of the wrath of God—but I like how Shirley Guthrie spoke of it eve more. He said "the wrath of God is the love of God burning. Parents among us know how easily love is transmuted to anger when one child hurts another. God detests the shameful way we treat each other. But my hope is in Christ, the perfect revelation of a God who reconciles, who forgives, who has an unhealthy obsession with loving the lost. I hope in a God of grace, a father who runs to welcome prodigals home, a mother who cannot forsake a child, a parent whose anger cannot ultimately stand up to his love.

Which is to say, hell probably exists, but I suspect it is empty.

Amen.