

Jeremiah 26:1-6

Turn from your evil ways
and live.

Psalm 90

Teach us to number
our days aright.

Luke 19:11-27

Ten minas – wicked servant is killed



2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

God's judgment is right, he will repay

In the name of the One who was, who is and who is come – in glory with all his angels...

Hell is a horrible thing to talk about. We'll argue politics and we'll discuss religion if it doesn't get into the discussion of eternal punishment. It's a topic we try to avoid at all costs, or try to deny its reality.

Example #1 – Think of how we characterize it. Gary Larson has a whole series of cartoons called "Nerds in Hell." One shows a line of desperate people in line in the midst of flames and Satan in the back ground watching. One of the nerds though turns to his neighbor and says with a smile on his face, "Hot enough for you."

Example #2 - Or perhaps you've seen David Letterman's Top Ten List of the worst things about hell. Number one is: The ice machine has a note, Out of Ice – Again.

Example #3 – And if we don't use humor to avoid the topic of hell, we downplay it in our everyday language. "My golf game is going to hell." Now I've played golf with some of you and your golf game is bad, but believe me it's not as bad as hell. You may say, "I'm having a hell of a time at work," and it may be difficult and for that I sympathize. But know it is nothing compared to a time and eternity in hell.

Even the church seems to be avoiding the topic of hell and preachers just aren't talking about it from their pulpits. And not only not talking about it. They are denying its reality. The inspiration for this sermon series came from a book I read recently called, "Hell under Fire." Here are the opening words:

"At some point in the nineteen-sixties, Hell disappeared. No one could say for certain when that happened. First it was there, then it wasn't. Different people became aware of the disappearance of Hell at different times. Some realized that they had been living for years as though Hell did not exist... and others realized that they had been behaving, out of habit, as though Hell was still there, though in fact they had ceased to believe in its existence long ago... (David Lodge)

The church historian Martin Marty who teaches on the faculty at the University of Chicago Divinity School canvassed one hundred years of some scholarly journals for entries on hell. He didn't find one. His conclusion? "Hell disappeared and no one noticed."

In a way you can understand why the horrible topic of hell has disappeared from American churches. We wonder, "How could a loving God send people to hell?" The way the Bible speaks of it is frightening. Anyone who takes it lightly has failed to ponder it deeply. Listen to how Paul describes hell in our lesson today:

- First he says Jesus is coming in blazing fire – that's a picture of judgment, burning firey judgment. Revelation pictures hell as a burning lake of sulphur. The Old Testament refers to hell as Ghenna, the name of the garbage dump southwest of Jerusalem where the fire never stopped burning; where the smoke never stopped rising; where the stench never went away; and where the worms and maggots never died.

Who likes to think about that? Who likes to preach like that? How popular did you think a preacher would be preaching like this preacher did more than a century ago: "Fire, fire! That is the recompense for your perversity, you hardened sinners. Fire, fire, the fires of hell! Fire in your eyes, fire in your mouth, fire in your guts, fire in your throat, fire in your nostrils, fire inside and fire outside, fir beneath and fire above, fire in every part. Ah, misearable folk! You will be like rags burning in the middle of this fire." (quoted in "Hell under Fire")

- Paul also says Jesus is coming with his powerful angels. The Bible describes Jesus second coming as glorious, when there will be a trumpet blast and the voice of God will speak, when every knee will bow and every tongue recognize him as Lord of Lords and King of Kings, and the angels with him will not be cute like a Precious Moments angel, "Aw, how cute." No. Jesus comes with an army of angels, thousands upon thousands of powerful angels. And the reaction they will get is,

“AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!” That’s how it is whenever they appeared in the Bible, right? They constantly had to remind the people they appeared to, “Do not be afraid.”

- Our lesson today also says that Jesus will repay those who do not know God and obey the Gospel with “eternal destruction.” Some preachers are trying to get around the idea of hell by explaining that hell is annihilation. In other words, if someone dies without Christ in their life they will simply cease to exist. That sounds bad enough, but at least it doesn’t go on forever and ever. How could a loving God condemn a single sin for eternity? But that’s what God’s Word says. It’s an eternal destruction, a destruction of body and soul over and over again for all eternity.
- Another way preachers and theologians try to explain hell away and make it disappear is to say it’s just a state or a condition. Pope John Paul spoke of it that way. It’s a mindset you will have if you don’t think about Jesus. You’ll be missing out because you won’t be able to think of heaven. But hell isn’t just a condition or a mindset, it’s a place where “they will be shut out from the presence of the Lord.” Shut out. On the outside looking in. Away from God, from his blessings, from hope, from peace for all eternity.

In this life, even Hitler enjoyed a hint of God’s goodness when he would look at the powerful beauty of the Alps. Even Osama bin Laden enjoyed the goodness of a sunset over the desert. All of us enjoy the laughter of children, the love of family, the taste and strength of fresh bread and the varieties of food God gives. But hell is a place, a real place, where God and his blessings, even the smallest of them will be gone.

I don’t tell you these things because I enjoy it. I don’t tell you these things without tears in my eyes. I tell you these things because Jesus tells about these things. Did you know that 13% of his teachings covered the topic of judgment and hell? Two-thirds of his parables address judgment including the parable of the minas we heard this morning. And when Jesus spoke of them he was clear and blunt, but don’t think he ever spoke them without tears. The most powerful, blunt chapter of Jesus’ judgment and rebuke ends like this, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I long to gather you as a mother hen gathers her chicks underneath her wing... but you were not willing.”

And understand too, I am hesitant to speak of these things that we all struggle with and would prefer to have disappear because I know that I deserve this horrible hell we’ve been talking about, for I am a sinner and so are we, and it’s the truth when we confess that we deserve God’s punishment now and in eternity.

The Christians in the city of Thessalonica struggled with questions about judgment day and hell and death and heaven as well. You see, Thessalonica was a major city in the Roman Empire. It was a logical choice for the Apostle Paul to start a mission there. The problem was, he only spent a short time there preaching and teaching before he was driven out by persecution. Apparently, because he was there for only a short time, he wasn’t able to address all the Thessalonians questions about Judgement Day. For example, in the first letter he wrote them, Paul assures them that their loved ones who have died already will not miss out on Judgment Day and won’t miss out on heaven. It seems that they sent a letter in response to Paul, asking him even more questions about end times. “Why, if we believe in Jesus, are we suffering?” “Isn’t Jesus ruling with power?” “Why doesn’t he come back to take us to be with him?” And here’s Paul’s answer, an entirely different way of looking at hell and God’s judgment. His way points out that hell is proof and evidence that God is just and God is love.

“All this (suffering, persecution, trouble) is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just. He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well.”

Picture it this way. Terrorists are flying a plane towards a building. They are high fiving each other. Celebrating. Ready to die for their cause and their God. But when the plane crashes into the building and takes many, many lives, including their own? What then? What do they face then? The question is not whether a loving God would ever send people to hell. The real question is how can God, a loving God, ignore all the evil in this world and not do something about it. God is just. His judgment is right.

I was looking through service folders from a year ago to plan out worship this week and noticed that a year ago at this time we were praying for Jessica Ridgeway and her family. We prayed knowing that God is love, and cared for her, and couldn’t ignore her situation, because his judgment is right. His judgment is just and will be when he returns to repay all those who trouble and do not obey his Gospel.

And not only is that judgement just and right, it is love. I can’t remember how old I was, but old enough to be a brother to my sister. When my dad let me know he wasn’t pleased with how I was treating her, I said something like, “She started it. She did it too. It wasn’t even that bad.” That’s when he said, “But she’s your sister, more than that, she’s

my daughter and I love her.” Do you see why God can’t ignore the evil that we do, the lack of love we give to others, how we can never minimize sin, because it’s sin against God and the people he loves.

“All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God,” because he loves you!

And more than that, he gave his Son for you, to suffer hell for you, to die on a cross, from the midst of darkness crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” That’s Jesus suffering hell, physically and spiritually, for you and for me and for the world. Forsaken and shut out from the presence of hell so we never would be. So we would never be apart from his love, never be absent of hope, always to have the hope of heaven. And you know the first place he appeared after he rose from the dead on Easter morning? You confess it each time we say the Apostles’ Creed as will do in a moment. He descended into hell. He stood in Satan’s domain and placed his foot on Satan’s throat and proclaimed victory. That’s why the Bible says, “He holds the keys to death and Hades.” He holds the keys that lock Satan and hell shut to us and unlock and open heaven for us. Hell hasn’t disappeared, but its power and hold on us has.

Think of what that means.

- A life without Jesus, a life not knowing Jesus, means that this life on earth is the closest thing to heaven would ever have.
- But a life with Jesus, a life knowing his love, knowing our eternity is with him in heaven, means that life here on earth, with all of its trouble and hardship and struggles, is the closest we will ever get to hell.

So warn others as God warns us of the dangers and horrors of hell, but always do it with tears in your eyes. So invite others as God calls to you again and again in his Gospel that you might know his love. And pray. Pray: Come Lord Jesus. Amen.

PDS / VVV

Thoughts used from:

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