

## **Hell - Why Eternal Conscious Punishment Is Not Enough**

**Sign Title: Why Eternal, Conscious Punishment Is Not Enough**

**July 11, 2010**

If you are new to Faith EFC, I would like to welcome you. My name is Kurt and I am one of the pastors. This morning we are talking about one of the most controversial topics in the Christian faith. It is a topic that many good Christians get wrong. It is a hard and sobering topic. It won't surprise me if some of you walk out this morning. It won't surprise me if this week I get nasty emails from people who just don't think what I am saying can possibly be true of our loving God.

While for some of us this will be very unsettling, for all of us, today is important because it will change the way we think about God, the world and those around us. Welcome to a sermon on hell.

In previous generations, the reality of hell and God's wrath was a common topic. Today, hell has all but disappeared from the scene and it is a topic that most preachers find too hot to handle. Even when we share the good news about Jesus Christ we don't talk about hell. People say, "Come to Christ, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." When people come to Christ and they don't win the lotto and their marriage struggles, they think we were lying about Jesus! When was the last time you heard, "Come to Christ, God loves you and if you reject him you will face judgment and eternal punishment for your sin." Nobody wants to say that anymore, but it is the truth!

When was the last time you heard an entire sermon on the unvarnished reality of hell? My guess is that today is your first one, so let's begin.

This morning, we are going to dive into this topic and look at it in five pieces.

## **Hell Defined**

Hell - The place of eternal, conscious, just torment at the hand of Christ.

As I mentioned, many people struggle with this definition because it is difficult to reconcile this kind of hell with the loving God we hear about each week in the pulpit. God's love for us through Christ is something we need to hear but sometimes we fail to give a balanced picture of God. Just as real as God's love and mercy is his justice and wrath. If we were to pile up the passages that talk about God's love and make another pile of passages that talk about God's wrath, which one do you think would be bigger? I think it would be the pile that talks about God's wrath against sin. The Bible has a lot to say about this so we shouldn't ignore it.

While God's wrath and punishment against sin has a sense of rightness, the definition of hell seems to go way beyond fair. How can God justify eternally tormenting people for a few bad choices they made in a limited life of 80 years? What about the millions of good and kind people around the world who will be in hell simply because they have not heard of Christ? That strains God's credibility. It looks like our loving God went off the deep end and is declaring capital punishment for minor traffic violations. It just doesn't make sense. Let's see if our definition can stand under pressure.

## Hell Defended

Many modern theologians don't like our definition because it feels too harsh and unreasonable. They try to tone hell down and make hell a happier place to be. While I don't expect anyone to know the names of the theological minds behind this assaulting on the traditional understanding of hell, I know all of us are familiar with people who think these things. Maybe you even you have a wrong view of hell.

### Universalism - Taking eternity out of hell

This is the belief that hell will not last forever and eventually everyone will arrive safely to heaven. They reason that since Christ died for all people, it logically follows that eventually, all will be saved. Even Satan will one day be happy in heaven. Universalists view hell as a kind of purgatory. It is a temporary place you go to pay for your sins. Once the guilt of our sins is purged we get a promotion to heaven. They believe everyone will eventually be in heaven, it is just some of us get there faster than others.

At first, this sounds good. It is the way many things work in this world, you rob a store, you spend 2 years in jail. Once that is paid for, you move on and are free. The problem is that while it sounds reasonable, it isn't what the Bible tells us is true. The Bible *always* describes hell as eternal, not temporary.

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Daniel 12:2 (ESV)

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels... And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'" Matthew 25:41, 46 (ESV)

And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. Matthew 12:32 (ESV)

Regarding the eventual salvation of the devil and the fallen angels, many of us know instinctively, from our study in the book of Hebrews, that Satan can not be saved. The devil and his angels fell and, as part of their fall, they were able to deceive Adam and Eve into sin and take the human race into the consequences of sin and death. Christ took on a human body to die for and redeem a portion of humanity. Christ didn't join himself with a demonic body to die and save demons, he died to save us. Satan and the demons will never be saved. They will be tormented eternally.

and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Revelation 20:10 (ESV)

So while thinking of hell as a place to burn off the guilt of our sin appears to make hell a little happier, according to the Bible, hell is permanent punishment, not temporary. While the universalists try to take the eternal out of hell, another group called the Annihilationists are trying to take the consciousness out of punishment.

#### **Annihilationism - Taking the consciousness out of punishment.**

This group says that while all will not be saved, nobody will exist in conscious torment forever. They believe God will resurrect the wicked to judge them; they are thrown into the lake of fire and there they will be consumed and cease to exist. The righteous through Christ will be granted eternal life, whereas everyone else is granted eternal death and annihilation from existence. It seems

much fairer to punish people into annihilation rather than maintain them in a state of eternal torment.

The problem is, when you check what the Bible says, the option of a happier hell where people experience punishment into annihilation is not what Scripture teaches. There are a number of verses that clearly teach us those in hell are tormented but never destroyed.

he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." Revelation 14:10–11 (ESV)

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, 2 Thessalonians 1:9 (ESV)

The Greek word for *destruction* in 2 Thessalonians is not *annihilation* but *unavoidable stress and torment*. Notice, it is not just human beings who are tortured but not annihilated for eternity but it is the devil and his angels that are in the same position.

and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Revelation 20:10 (ESV)

It is clear! Not everyone will be saved. Some will experience eternal punishment in hell from which they will never be released and while they are tormented in the fires of hell, they will never be consumed.

While the eternalness and consciousness of hell doesn't feel fair, that is what the Bible teaches. To say anything else is to contort the text beyond the range of the greatest circus acrobats. I know this does not seem fair. While

eternal, conscious punishment does not feel fair, that isn't the question. The real question we need to answer is, "Is it fair?" Is eternal, conscious punishment the right punishment for those who either reject Christ outright or die without knowing him?

From our perspective, everlasting punishment is disproportionate to the offenses we commit. God appears cruel and vindictive. We are told the purpose of punishment is always redemptive. Rehabilitation is the goal of prison sentences. A place of endless punishment without the possibility of parole doesn't seem fair. That is our perspective of the fairness of hell. While I can't answer all of your questions on the fairness of hell, I think if I can answer some of them if we look at hell from God's perspective.

### **Hell's punishments just response to our sinful choices.**

In the beginning of this series we learned that after we die, those who have trusted Christ go to be with Christ. Those who die without Christ go to a place of torment called Hades. We learned this is not hell proper but is more like a holding place. At the end of time everyone will be resurrected and judged individually.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. Revelation 20:12 (ESV)

No one is saved by works. Salvation is a gift of God that we cannot earn or deserve. BUT; for the unsaved, the way they live their life will be the basis for their final judgment. In other words, everyone will be rightly judged on the basis

of what they did with what they knew about Christ and their built in sense of morality.

Those without specific knowledge about Christ will be judged by what they knew about God from the light of nature and their own consciences.

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. Romans 1:20 (ESV)

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. Romans 2:14–16 (ESV)

This does not mean anyone will be in heaven apart from trusting in Christ. The general revelation given to us through nature and our consciences is not enough to save us, it is only enough to condemn us. A personal knowledge of, and trust in, Christ is what is needed for salvation.

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:12 (ESV)

Whatever the degree of punishment people receive in hell, it will be a just response to the sins they have committed in their lives that they knew full well were wrong. The only people who will receive mercy and not justice on that final day will be those who have trusted in Christ on the cross, who took the punishment they deserve to receive. Those who do not believe in Christ, either because they have not heard of him or they rejected him outright, will receive justice that fits the sins they committed.

Either way, God will be glorified, either for his undeserved mercy and grace toward us through Christ or as he delivers his fully deserved and perfect wrath upon those in hell, they will glorify him as they receive only what they deserve.

Lest you think hell won't be too bad for good people, think of how accurately and completely God's judgement will be. Every day and every thought of our lives will be analyzed in minute detail. The hidden thoughts and secret motives of each day will be accounted for. The words spoken in secret will be made public, the intentions of peoples heart's will be exposed. There will be no attorney to get people off the hook, no loopholes to escape the wheels of divine justice, just crystal clear, indisputable facts and justice.

The balance of justice will be so complete that every porno addict will wish he had never looked at even one sleazy web site. The thief will wish he had never stolen his friends pencil in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The adulterer will wish she had never considered thoughts of another man outside of her marriage vows. Not having those initial thoughts wouldn't save them, but it would make their eternal existence in hell slightly more bearable because there would be less they will be eternally punished for.

Remember that before God, nothing will be misinterpreted. There is no such thing as an extenuating circumstance. There is just perfect and pure justice for sins. The more heinous the crime, the more heinous the punishment.

While the thought of anyone standing naked in body, mind, motives before God is unsettling, it is also comforting. We all watch Forensic Files and Unsolved

Mysteries. We all read the newspapers that are littered with stories of rape, child abuse, murders, extortion and bribes. Rest assured! One day there will be no unsolved mysteries. Every sin will be justly repaid. Final justice will be served. No torment in hell will be considered cruel. Cruelty is giving people what they don't deserve. The torments of hell will be considered just. God will punish people with what they do deserve. The good moral upstanding citizen who dies without Christ will not be punished as severely as Hitler; but, they will both be punished.

**Hell's punishments are not enough to atone for sin.**

The reason why hell is eternal is because everyone apart from Christ is eternally guilty. Hear this carefully. *No amount of human suffering can ever pay the price for sin.* While eternal torment is deserved because of sin, that torment doesn't pay for sin. If any amount of our suffering could erase even the most insignificant sin, then those in hell would eventually be freed because their debt would be paid. All the goodness of humanity and the suffering of humanity if added together from the beginning of time until the end of time, can not pay the price of so much as a single sin. That is why hell is eternal. While punishment is deserved, it doesn't pay the price for sin and relieve us from our guilt against an infinite God.

The sufferings of hell are eternal because the one we have sinned against is infinite. The only sacrifice that can atone for infinite guilt is one of infinite worth. The only sacrifice for sin of infinite worth is Jesus Christ. That is why he is the only sacrifice for sin.

## **Hell's punishments feel offensive because we don't understand the seriousness of our sin.**

Jonathon Edwards said the reason we find hell so offensive is because we are insensitive to the filth of our sin. The seriousness of our sin is determined by the greatness of the one we sin against. Sin is rebellion against an infinite being that deserves an infinite penalty. We can argue with God and buck him all we want but we can not change who he is.

It is like a mouse trying to push back an earth mover or a row boat trying to cut off a battle ship. We can't change who God is and the seriousness of what our sin is against him.

Thankfully, God has other qualities besides his wrath. He is also full of love and mercy. He sent his son to die for our sins. He sent the only payment sufficient to atone for sin against God and that is a payment God himself supplied with His Son. That is what God did for us through Jesus Christ. As it says in Ephesians 2, even though we are *dead in our sin*, fully deserving punishment and judgment, *he made us alive through Christ Jesus*. Did we accept Christ as our savior? Yes and No. We chose Christ because God breathed spiritual life into our dead souls so we can see Christ for who he is and trust him. God gets all the glory, either for the fully deserved punishment people receive in hell or the undeserved mercy we have received through Christ who brings us to heaven.

## **Hell Described**

What is the torment of hell like? To understand we need to understand that in Greek there are three different words that are frequently translated as hell in our English Bible.

- **Sheol or Hades** - For those of you who were here earlier in the series, you learned of a place called Sheol or Hades. This is where people without Christ go when they die. It is not hell proper, it is a temporary place of punishment before the final resurrection and judgment of the dead.
- **Tartus** - 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 give us another Greek word that is sometimes translated as hell in our Bibles. The Greek word is Tartus. Tartus is not hell. It is a temporary holding place of punishment where God has confined particularly evil angels until the final judgment.
- **Gehenna** - Gehenna is the Greek for Hell. Sometimes it is also referred to as the lake of fire. The word Gehenna in the Greek literally means, “The Valley of Hinnom.” This valley is a physical location outside of Jerusalem that used to be a place of pagan worship and human sacrifice. The Jews turned it into a huge garbage dump that stunk, was filled with rot and always had fires that were burning. It was a horrid place. When Jesus describes hell as **‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ Mark 9:48 (ESV)** He is literally making a reference to what it was like in the Valley of Hinnom where the worms and the fires literally do not die. In the Jewish mind and in the words of Jesus, that terrible place was foreshadowing the ultimate hell, the lake of fire.

### **Will there be literal fire in hell?**

When we think of hell, we think of fire since Christ spoke of the “fires of hell” and in Revelation we read about, “the lake of fire.” Will hell really be fire? There is no reason it couldn’t be literal fire. Remember eventually everyone is

resurrected and given indestructible bodies. We get indestructible bodies to live on the new heavens and earth, everyone else gets indestructible bodies to exist forever in hell. They could literally be constantly burning but never consumed. While I don't want to downplay the torments of a literal eternal fire, that may not be the worst torment of hell. The worst torment may be Christ removing his restraining influence from sin in a persons life and letting their own sins torment them for eternity. The drug addict will be tormented for eternity, desperate for a fix. The porn addicts passions may be hotter than hell but they will never be fulfilled. The burden of guilt and shame for a wasted life will never be lifted. That may be a greater torment than the fires of hell.

### **Who is in charge of hell?**

When we think about hell, we think of the devil with his pointy tail and pitchfork leading the tormenting. Is that true? Sorry, the devil and the demons are being tormented. They are not doing the tormenting. Who do you think is in charge of the torments of hell? Jesus and his angels.

he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. Revelation 14:10 (NIV)

Just as Jesus is the center of the New Creation, he is the king over the lake of fire. All things center on Jesus.

far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, Ephesians 1:21-22 (ESV)

You may remember from previous studies that rules, authorities, powers and dominions are rabbinic classifications for levels of angels. Christ is in charge

over all angels, fallen and good, in this age and the age to come. Christ has all things under his feet. Christ is head over all things. He is even head over hell.

### **Will we be able to see people tormented in hell?**

I do not know. In the Old Testament, God sometimes invited his people to watch the destruction of the wicked. We may be able to see the torments of hell. How can we be happy in heaven if we can see the torments of hell? I do not know. This strains the imagination, but in heaven we will see things from God's perspective and everyone, even those in hell, will acknowledge the eternal punishment they are receiving is nothing more and nothing less than they deserve. Those in hell will glorify Christ for giving them what they deserve. We will glorify God even more in heaven if we see what we deserve in hell but instead we are given dizzying levels of mercy and grace by our adoption to be Christ's brothers and sisters. Glory goes to God for his just wrath against sin. Glory goes to God for the greatest act of mercy and grace ever given.

### **Hell Applied**

I know a number of you have your heads spinning. This is deep stuff. It is stuff we don't usually talk about but if we don't get this straight, we will walk with a spiritual limp. I invite you to hit the web this week, reread my manuscript and think this through. It will do you spiritual good. Before we leave this morning, let's talk about how we can apply this?

**Change our thinking about what we deserve.** Nobody is good and deserving of heaven but everyone is evil and deserving of hell. There is no such thing as a good person. As Romans 3 says, there is no one righteous, not even

one. Until we get that straight our entire world view will be messed up. We will never understand why Christ is the only option, not one of many.

**Let God take care of justice.** One of the things we get bent out of shape with is we want justice after someone wrongs us. Our courts are filled with people taking others to task. I am not saying Christians should never go to court but I am saying we need to leave room for God's justice.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." Romans 12:19 (ESV)

Nobody gets away with anything. The unsolved crimes will be solved and the murders punished.

**Tell people about Jesus.** How can we save people from hell? Tell people about Jesus. Everyone is spiritually dead. The whole message of God loving us and Christ dying for us is foolishness to people. **But** it is the way God breaths spiritual life into dead souls. We save people from hell by telling them of the love God has for them through Jesus and God uses that knowledge about Jesus to light their spiritual fire. It may seem foolish, it may not be slick, but it is the means God uses to breath life into dead souls.

**Let's pray**



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