

Heaven and Hell (Part 2)

Welcome to the fourth and final part of our 'Connect Group Extra' sessions this term. We have taken a couple of themes from our studies in 1 Peter and explored them in more depth. The first two 'Extra' sessions looked at living as 'strangers and aliens' in this world, and the second pair of studies is focused on the life to come. The theme was heaven in the third session, and we now conclude with the subject of hell.

In our culture, heaven is usually portrayed as floating on clouds and playing harps – all very peaceful, but rather dull. In contrast, hell is generally caricatured as much more fun – that is unless you are a 'very bad person', and then hell becomes much more fire and brimstone. Our culture is, at best, confused, and at worst, tragically misguided about the subject. The Bible has much to say about the seriousness and reality of hell.

The disappearance of hell

Last year, I attended a clergy conference, and one of the sessions was about hell. The speaker, Kendall Harmon, who serves in the Anglican Diocese of South Carolina, has written extensively on the subject, and gave a 45 minute talk at the conference. It is well worth a listen, and there is also a handout with some headings and quotations that can be downloaded. (NB: 'Eschatology' is theological word for the study of the last things.)

Harmon gives four reasons why hell has largely disappeared from our collective minds – both outside and inside the church. Listen to this section of his talk:

www.renewconference.org.uk/talk/renew-2019-6 09:05 – 16:02

- More 'hell on earth' in the 20th century than the previous nineteen centuries combined
- Rise of individualism since the Second World War
- Focus on this life only due to loss of confidence in creation and the afterlife
- Huge advances in medical technology means we are far less familiar with death

Put together, these are a powerful combination of reasons why it is difficult to consider hell, but consider it we must if we are to take the scriptures seriously.

Jesus and hell

In his talk, Harmon gives a very brief (90 second) summary of the Old Testament background on hell (starts at 30:06), then a few minutes on the images used in the New Testament. For this Connect Group Extra session we are focusing on what Jesus said about hell, as no-one in the Bible said more on the subject than him.

Many of us are familiar with Jesus' teaching on God's love, and we like to be reminded of it regularly. Arguably the most famous verse in the Bible speaks of this: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..."* Heroic, self-sacrificial love for people like you and me – *that's* a message worth getting excited about and sharing!

But, the verse continues, *"...that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* We would rather not think about the "perishing" bit, and we really stub our toes on the last verse of John chapter 3 (v.36, NIV): *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them."* Ouch. This is a very binary statement in an increasingly fluid world.

In the Gospels we see Jesus repeatedly warning his listeners about the reality of hell, which is summarised by one writer as:

"...the place of conscious, eternal torment where people experience God's punishment for their sin. Yes, hell is 'the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels' (Matthew 25:41), but also for those who join them in their rebellion against God (Matthew 11:20-24). The horror of hell is such that Jesus says, 'if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire' (Mark 9:43). For those who do not enter the narrow door of faith and repentance in Jesus (Luke 13:24) a place of weeping and gnashing teeth awaits them (Luke 13:28).

Matthew Harmon (no relation to Kendall, I think!), contributing writer for Christianity.com

Another writer says that Jesus likened hell to "a fire" at least twenty different times. Clearly, Jesus thinks it is of vital importance, and spoke most clearly in Luke chapter 16.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Take a couple of minutes to read Luke 16:19-31. *"The passage seems much like a parable, but it is not specifically called that. In this text, Jesus's primary intent was not to describe details of the unbeliever's afterlife, but the Lord does end up giving us an insider's view of hell, encapsulating important details of what is taught on this subject elsewhere."* (Michael Allen Rogers writing on [www. crossway.org](http://www.crossway.org))

Rogers helpfully highlights a couple of key things from Jesus: First, that hell has no exit door (v.26). This sobering fact means the “great chasm” cannot be crossed after death, so the choices we make in this life have eternal consequences. Once in hell, it is too late to believe in Jesus as Lord; it is too late to beg for divine mercy.

Second, Jesus says God’s word gives sufficient warning about how to avoid hell (vv.27-31). Jesus does not conceal the uncomfortable truth about the eternal destiny of those who reject him, but crucially, he offers a way back to God: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”* (John 5:24).

Speaking of hell

The Bible takes hell extremely seriously, and therefore so should we. The flippant approach often taken by advertisers and the media has no place in the Christian’s life. On the contrary, we must speak about hell with a crack in our voice and tears in our eyes. But, we must not forget that Jesus came as a saviour, the only one able to rescue us from death and hell. Knowing what we are saved from helps us appreciate seriousness of sin and the enormity of Christ’s sacrifice all the more.

Questions to consider / discuss:

1. How much do you think about hell? *Do* you think about it?
2. If a friend asked you what hell is like, how would you reply?
3. What parts of Jesus’ story of the Rich Man and Lazarus stand out? Is there anything you particularly struggle with?
4. How does knowing what we are saved from help us speak to others about Jesus?
5. Take some time to reflect on these words from the song, ‘In Christ Alone’:

*Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied –
For every sin on Him was laid;
Here in the death of Christ I live.*

*No power of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand:
Till He returns or calls me home,
Here in the power of Christ I’ll stand.*