

# The Gospel - The Problem of Hell

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The longer I live, the more people I have known who no longer live. Grandparents, some uncles, and neighbors have all passed away. I remember hearing that my father's friend, Mr. Doug, had died. He was a kind and giving man who always wore work clothes and drove an old truck. You would not have known that he was very wealthy by his lifestyle. All that he owned was left for others. He took nothing with him.

I will never forget the first funeral at which I officiated in New Jersey. The young man had become depressed and taken his own life. Since that time I have presided over the burials of many. Although I had known most before their deaths, there were some whom I had never met. In any case, death is a cruel reality.

What has happened to all whom I have known who no longer live?

The Westminster Divines believed the questions should be answered. In 1643 they composed the following statement

as a result of their study and meetings held at Westminster:

"The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Besides these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none."

-Chapter 32

Is this an accurate reflection of how the Scriptures represent hell? The New Testament writer Luke included Christ's teaching on the subject in his gospel.

## Read Luke 16:19-31

“19There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores 21and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

22The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 24So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have

pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

25But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 26And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

27He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, 28for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

29Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

30 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

31He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' "

Old Testament mention of hell is rare in comparison to the frequency found in the New Testament. It is in the teachings of Christ, as recorded in the gospels, that we receive our understanding of the final state of those who die without a proper acknowledgement of Christ.

The main point of this parable is to teach that there are consequences for being selfish. Yet within the parable we are also taught about hell itself. One might wonder, if this were the only reference to hell in the Bible, if perhaps it did not exist. But this is not the case. When Christ teaches by way of a parable, He uses a setting that reflects reality. The setting of the lost coin or the lost sheep places the story in a context, which is a part of reality. Sheep, coins, shepherds, women, friends, and so on, all exist. Those hearing the account understood that the story itself was to be used as a means to understand an important truth, even though the characters never actually existed and the story probably never happened: It was just that—a story.

This parable and many other similar accounts teach us that hell, like heaven, is a reality and is to be taken very seriously.

What do we know about hell from the Bible?

## People are conscious.

The well-known Dr. Jack Kevorkian has assisted many people suffering from a terminal illness in taking their own lives. Over the years he has been present at the deaths of many who have followed his instructions. These people became convinced that physical suffering would end at death. I wonder why people believe that. Perhaps it comes from what they have observed. When a loved one takes his or her last breath, there appears to be a cessation of all feeling. All is quiet and calm. There is the

absence of consciousness. You might even say that the person looks “at peace.” Many believe that you no longer exist when your life is over. The way to escape pain is to take your life. Certainly this appears to be what Dr. Kevorkian believes. What does he know about reality after death?

In the Luke parable Christ teaches that we don't stop existing after death.

After the rich man died and was buried he learned of the reality of hell. He found that his senses still functioned: He was in torment. He could feel the heat. He could also see. He looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. He was able to communicate. The rich man called to Father Abraham, requesting pity. “Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.”

There is no soul sleep. The spirit is very much alive. One is alert and conscious. There is communication. The person is able to identify others and discern the nature of his environment. He has desires and feelings. There is no escape.

**It is a permanent place of torment.**

The selfish rich man after living a life showing no compassion to others, died and immediately went to hell. The situation is described in verse 24:

...“I am in agony in this fire.”

Other passages on hell speak of the agony and torment that exist for those who are there.

Matthew 13:

“47 Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. 48 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. 49 This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous 50 and throw them into the **fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**”

Mark 9:43-48 describes more of the reality of hell:

"Where the fire never goes out...."

"Their worm does not die,  
And the fire is not quenched...."

Revelation says of those who worshipped the beast and his image and received the mark on the forehead that they will drink the wine of God's fury, the cup of wrath.

"He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever."  
Rev. 14:10

How could fire effect spirits like Satan or his demons? We acknowledge that in dealing with the teachings on hell and heaven, the language may need to be taken figuratively. Perhaps it is not literal fire. Yet what is clear is the presence of real pain and agony such as experienced in being burned by fire.

I cannot think of an injury that is more painful than being burned. I recall visiting a friend in the burn unit of Baptist Medical Center in Oklahoma City, who, while working on his car, received severe burns on his hands, arms, and face from a sudden explosion of gas. His injuries could not have been much worse. At times they would scrub his arms, hands and face in order to fight infection. One never would have convinced him that his suffering could have been more intense. This man was in great pain. In time, however, he recovered. Those in hell will not.

The picture of hell presented in these verses is consistent with accounts given to us pertaining to the wrath of God experienced on this side of eternity. There is nothing but suffering.

### **Hell is permanent**

Luke 16:26 mentions that there exists a great chasm which is **fixed**. Revelation 14:11 and 20:10 speak of the fact that the agony does not stop.

"And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever...."

"And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophets had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever."

### **God has provided a means of warning**

In the parable we see that although the rich man cannot escape, he certainly would like to see others avoid the same judgment:

"29Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

30 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

31He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' "

There is no hope after a person dies. There is a limited time for a person to respond to the message of hope. We must understand that it is not the lack of a message or warning that places people on the rolls of hell. It is our lives, our behaviors and attitudes that set all of us on the hell-path. The fact that the message exists is not a "right." It does not make the circumstances fair. The circumstance is always fair. God justly condemns all of us to eternal punishment because of our offense to Him and because of the offense of our parents, Adam and Eve. If we have a biblical

view of this world, we will see that all deserve God's anger and wrath. The message of hope found in the gospel is part of grace. It is neither owed us, nor deserved.

Hell is a challenge for us. The believer has the obligation to warn others of the reality of hell. It is not too late to avoid hell for ourselves or to warn others of its pain.

### -Reflection-

1. What is your view of the topic of hell? How often do you speak about it?
2. How do you handle the scriptural references to hell found in the gospel of Luke?
3. Do people in general accept the reality of hell, or do they view it as a fairytale?
4. Why do those who say they believe it is true, live as though unaware of its reality?
5. What does the reality of hell do to your understanding of the gospel? Does your knowledge of hell change your life?