

Is There Really a Hell and is it Forever?

By [Rev. Mike Osborne](#)

Our reading is from Matthew chapter 13, verses 44 through 50.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. 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. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The Word of the Lord.

We have been, for the last few weeks of this summer, in a series we've called Honest Answers for Honest Questions. Each week we're taking a different question—either one submitted by you, the congregation, or one we believe you're asking, whether you've voiced it or not. And this morning, I want to take up two of the most troubling questions Christians are asked about our faith: Is there really a hell? And does it last forever?

For many people in our culture today, hell is the place that must not be named. It's an offensive doctrine. Few people talk about it, and when they do, it's usually with sarcasm, contempt, or skepticism. I think we, as God's people, often feel a sense of embarrassment when the subject comes up. I remember a couple of years ago getting together with some old high school friends. After it became known that I was a pastor—I'd become a Christian since high school—one of them, after asking a few other questions about Christianity, said, "Now... you're not one of those Christians who believes in a fiery hell, are you?" And I said, "Yes, I am." She was aghast that I would believe such a thing.

Nobody likes to think about hell. Frankly, I'd rather preach on something far more uplifting and encouraging. But if there really is a place anything like the hell

described in the Bible, wouldn't it be the right thing to tell people about it? If such a place exists, wouldn't it actually be the loving thing to warn people?

So let me show my cards. As I said a moment ago, I do believe in hell. I believe in it not because I understand everything about it, not because I can answer every question, and not because the Bible tells us everything we might like to know. I believe in it because I am compelled to believe it by the Holy Scriptures—and because I'm your pastor, and part of my calling is to study the Scriptures and tell you what they say.

We're going to talk about hell this morning not only so that you can take warning, but so that you can warn others as well. The text just read is one of many passages we could have chosen, but I chose it because in a very short space it teaches two very simple truths. And the first is this: there really is a hell. There really is a hell. Look at verses 49 and 50. Jesus says, "This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

In Matthew 13, Jesus teaches through stories—parables. There are seven, possibly eight, depending on how you count the final one. There's the parable of the sower, the wheat and the tares, the mustard seed, the yeast, and then the three we read: the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, and this net full of fish.

Let's spend a few moments with that last one—the net full of fish. It's very similar to the parable of the wheat and the weeds earlier in the chapter, and also to the well-known passage in chapter 25 about the sheep and the goats. The same basic lesson runs through all three. In this story, Jesus says there are basically two kinds of fish in the sea: good fish and bad fish. They swim side by side, but one day there will be a day of separation—a day of reckoning, a day of judgment. On that day, the fishermen will sort the fish: the good into baskets, the bad thrown away.

That's the story. But who is Jesus talking about? Obviously not fish. He's talking about human beings. The good fish are followers of Jesus Christ—people who have been born again, who have turned from their sins, who have trusted Christ for salvation. They are "righteous," Jesus says—not because they are inherently better, but because their sins have been washed away and Christ's righteousness has been imputed to them. The bad fish are those who choose to live life on their own, who ignore Jesus Christ and remain in their sin. They are "wicked," not because they are inherently worse, but because they have rejected Jesus and spurned His offer of salvation. They are what the righteous would be were it not for the work of Christ.

And verse 50 says the final destination of that group—the wicked—is the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. This place Jesus refers to goes by several names in Scripture: Hades, the abyss, and in Revelation, the lake of fire.

We usually call it hell, but in the New Testament it most often goes by the name Gehenna. If you were reading Matthew in the original language, you would see that this is the word Jesus frequently uses. Gehenna refers to the Valley of Hinnom, a geographical area outside Jerusalem. Hundreds of years before the time of Christ, God's people worshiped idols there—and even worse, children were murdered there, sacrificed to the pagan god Molech. Their parents made them walk through fire, and in the process they died. That was the Valley of Hinnom, if you can imagine such a thing.

Fortunately, a good king—Josiah—later destroyed that place and its use for idol worship, and he turned it into the city's trash dump. The Valley of Hinnom became a landfill. Human waste, garbage, and even the bodies of criminals were piled there. It was a disgusting, awful place—a place where the fires never went out and the maggots never died. That word Gehenna then became a synonym for hell. That's why Jesus compares hell to a fiery furnace. You can picture the fire on that landfill continually burning up the refuse of Jerusalem.

So, friends, hell is not a figurative expression. It's not a metaphor. It's not a state of mind, as you sometimes hear people say. No—according to Scripture, it is an actual place. It is the final destination of unrepentant sinners, as well as the final destination of Satan and his demons. And the person in the Bible who speaks more about hell than anyone else is the most loving, most caring, most humble, most gentle person who has ever lived: Jesus Christ. It's true—He speaks more about hell than anyone else in Scripture. One estimate says that 13% of His teaching touches on hell, and that half of His parables involve punishment, judgment, or hell. Jesus was very upfront about this topic.

So let me tell you five things Jesus said about hell. There are more, but these five are especially pertinent.

1. Hell is a place of separation from the gracious presence of God.

Earlier in this chapter, when Jesus explains the parable of the wheat and the tares, He says in verse 41 that the Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will weed out of His kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. "They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be"—here's that phrase again—"weeping and gnashing of teeth." And then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

There are only two options, Jesus says. You are either wheat or weed. You are either a good fish or a bad fish. You are either saved or lost. You will either be

welcomed into the kingdom of God or weeded out. You will either shine like the sun in the kingdom of your Father or go to the fiery furnace. You will either be with Christ forever or separated from Him and His love forever.

2. Hell is a place of utter darkness and gloom.

Three times in Matthew, Jesus says that those who reject Him will be thrown “outside, into the darkness.” What a horrible image—cast out, away from the light, into the darkness.

3. Hell is a place of conscious, extreme sorrow and regret.

Jesus uses the phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” again and again. As I think about that phrase, I imagine Jesus using it to express a kind of regret or hopelessness we can hardly fathom—mixed with anger, mixed with self-contempt, all wrapped up in that image of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

4. Hell is a place of fire.

In our text today, Jesus calls it a fiery furnace. Elsewhere He speaks of “eternal fire” or “the fire of hell.” Revelation 14 describes burning sulfur. Revelation 20 calls it the lake of fire. Many other New Testament passages use the imagery of fire.

Now, I know this raises a question. Earlier we said hell is a place of utter darkness, and now we’re saying it’s a place of fire. How can it be both? The answer is that Jesus is using highly figurative language to describe a reality we have never experienced—a place of unimaginable agony. He uses images we can grasp. The point is that hell is both physically and psychologically horrible—just as fire is painful and intense, so is hell, in whatever ways it is painful and intense.

5. Hell lasts forever.

It is a place of eternal punishment.

Let me show you a few verses, because this is an important part of the biblical teaching on hell—and it’s the part you and I will be challenged on more than any other. In Matthew 18, Jesus says it is better to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. Mark 9:43 says something similar: it is better to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, “where the fire never goes out.” In Matthew 25—the story of the sheep and the goats—Jesus says the Lord will say to those on His left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” And later He says, “They will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Notice that the word eternal is the same Greek word applied to both heaven and hell. If hell is not eternal, then neither is heaven. They stand or fall together. Hell lasts forever just as heaven lasts forever.

Finally, in Mark 9, Jesus quotes Isaiah 66: “Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched”—another graphic way of describing the everlasting nature of hell.

Now, a number of evangelical scholars and theologians have departed from the traditional view of hell being forever. They hold to something called annihilationism—the idea that at some point unbelievers simply cease to exist, their bodies and souls dissolving. Some say it happens at death; others say it happens on Judgment Day. Others say annihilation might happen after a person has suffered for a little while in hell. But eventually, according to the annihilationist view, the souls and bodies of people in hell are fully and finally destroyed.

There are several problems with that theory. I don’t have time to go into all of them, but not the least is this: if annihilationism is true, then Jesus was lying when He said hell is eternal. And not only that—if people in hell are eventually annihilated, then think about it: there is more than one way to be saved from God’s wrath. One way is through the blood of Jesus, through faith in Christ. The other way is simply to do nothing. If you refuse Christ, if you just get through Judgment Day—maybe suffer a little while—eventually your suffering ends and you cease to exist.

Friends, it’s not true. Annihilationism is not true. If you’d like to study it further, I’d recommend Robert Peterson’s book *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment*. Some who hold that view, I believe, are missing the clear teaching of Scripture. There are also people today called universalists, who believe that eventually everyone gets to heaven. This view was popularized a few years ago by Rob Bell in his book *Love Wins*. That is not true. Some believe in reincarnation—you get to live again and again. Some from a Roman Catholic background believe in purgatory. But I assure you, all of these are human attempts to get around the plain truth of Scripture: there are only two destinations, and hell is a real place that lasts forever.

Now, I can imagine what some of you may be thinking: I don’t know if I like this God. My God is much more loving than what Mike is describing. I don’t believe in a God who would send people to hell.

Let me say two things about that. First, you don’t get to pick your God.

God is who He is. You must embrace Him on His terms or not at all. You cannot play favorites with His attributes. You can’t say, “I like God’s love, but I don’t like

His justice or His holiness.” God is who He is. In fact, you might be surprised to know that the Bible speaks far more about God’s holiness than His love. The wrath of God is mentioned roughly 600 times. And if you don’t believe in a God of holiness, justice, and wrath, then you will never understand the love of God.

God loves the human race so much that He sent Jesus to die on the cross—to be our substitute, to receive the wrath of God in our place—so that we might be delivered from it. The love of God shines brightest against the backdrop of His holiness and justice, because God has provided a way. He has made it possible for you to be sure you will never go to hell—because He loves you. The door to heaven stands wide open, and Jesus is standing there, beckoning you, ready to receive you with joy. So don’t try to choose your God. Receive Him as He is. That is the only way to receive Him.

Second, to anyone struggling with this doctrine and not seeing the love of God in it, I want you to know that in a very real sense, God does not send anyone to hell. The people who are in hell are there because they freely choose to be. I know for a fact that before God stepped into my life in 1975 and made me new, I was freely on my way to hell—because I wanted to do the things I did. And if God had not saved me, I would deserve to be punished there. C. S. Lewis once said there are only two kinds of people in the world: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says in the end, “Thy will be done.”

No one is in hell who does not want to be there. And here is the good news: no one will go to hell who truly wants to know Jesus Christ. You say, “But why must a person pay eternally for sin? Is sin really that bad?” The Bible’s answer is yes. If sin merits eternal punishment, then it must be that bad. Sin is an attack against God—the One who made you, who breathed life into you, who sustains every heartbeat, who surrounds you with blessings every day, and who gave His own Son so that you might be forgiven. Sin is an assault on an infinitely loving, gracious God. If hell proves anything, it proves the exceeding sinfulness of sin. When we sin, we offend the King who has every right to lay down the terms of our relationship with Him. And the punishment must fit the crime.

Well, I said Matthew 13 teaches two things. First, that hell is a real place—and many go there. But second—and this is the good news—you don’t have to be one of them.

Your friend doesn’t have to be one of them.

Your parents don’t have to be one of them.

Your children don’t have to go to hell.

Your neighbors, the Dagomba people of Ghana we prayed for earlier, do not have to go to hell—if they will do one thing: repent and believe the gospel of

Jesus Christ. In verses 44–46, Jesus gives two short parables. In verse 44, He says the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man finds it, he hides it again, and in his joy sells all he has and buys that field. What is that treasure? In verse 45, He says the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he finds one of great value, he sells everything he has and buys it. What is that pearl of great price? The treasure worth everything you can give, the pearl of greatest value in the universe, is Jesus Christ. He is the King worth more than anything the world offers. He is worth giving up everything in order to have Him.

In the Apostles' Creed—which we'll read before the Lord's Supper—we speak of Jesus "descending into hell." That is what He did on the cross. He experienced separation from His loving Father for you and for me. He absorbed your sin, took your guilt and misery upon Himself, and died the death you deserve so that you might live the life you don't deserve. Jesus Christ is that treasure. He is that pearl. Follow Him, and you will never have to dread hell.

Listen—if anything I've said today about hell is true, then you have the most critical decision before you that you will ever face. Are you willing to bet your eternity on the chance that hell does not exist? Are you willing to wait until your final breath to find out? Are you willing to keep procrastinating about Jesus Christ on the gamble that God will not call your number before you've made peace with Him?

The stakes are that high. Depending on what you do with Jesus, you have eternal life to either lose or gain. Those are your two options: heaven or hell. There is no door number three. And if this teaching about hell is true, then let me speak to us as a church family: those words on the back wall have never meant more than they do right now.

We are here to go and make disciples of all nations. Can you possibly ignore the plight of your neighbors—your coworkers, your classmates, the people across the street, the people across the world—once you understand their destination if they die without Jesus Christ? So what will you do? What will you give away? How will you serve? To whom will you speak? Because what we've learned from God's Word this morning demands a response. We cannot remain uncommitted. Once we understand the truth about heaven and hell, we realize that we hold the treasure they need. We have discovered the pearl of greatest price. Let's give it away. Let's give it away.

Nora Ephron—one of my favorite screenwriters and directors—you probably know many of her films: *When Harry Met Sally*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *You've Got Mail*, *Julie & Julia*. She died this past week of leukemia-related pneumonia. Shortly before her death, she said this:

“You get to a certain point in life where you have to realistically understand that the days are getting shorter, and you can’t put off thinking that you’ll get to them someday. If you really want to do them, you’d better do them. There are simply too many people getting sick, and sooner or later, you will.”

She’s right. And Nora Ephron entered eternity a few days ago. So will you. So will I. Where will you be?

The Rev. Mike Osborne joined the staff of RTS Orlando in March, 2019, as the new Dean of Students. He also serves as Director of Field Education and Placement, assisting and mentoring MDiv students as they prepare for full-time gospel ministry. In addition Mike is often found in the classroom, teaching preaching labs and pastoral counseling classes.

This article is based upon a verbatim text of a sermon by Rev. Osborne. It has been lightly edited by Copilot, as well as the theological staff at Third Millennium Ministries.

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