

A Fate Worse Than Disability

Mark 9:43-50 *"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to Hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched -- ⁴⁴ "where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.' ⁴⁵ "And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into Hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched -- ⁴⁶ "where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.' ⁴⁷ "And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into Hell fire -- ⁴⁸ "where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.' ⁴⁹ "For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. ⁵⁰ "Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another."*

How many sermons have you heard in the last 5 to ten years on Hell? Hell has become unfashionable, and even anti-social. The quickest way to embarrass Christians, the world has learnt, is to accost them with this question, "So do you believe I'm going to Hell? Do you believe all non-Christians, even good people, are going to burn in Hell forever?" And the truth is, most of us are very uncomfortable with that idea. We squirm. We retreat. Yes, we believe it, but we'd rather not speak about and think about it.

We preachers are not immune to this either. Gone are the days when sermons were filled with graphic descriptions of Hell. Here and there you find a preacher who loves to preach on Hell, and to do so graphically, but we always wonder if the man has cauterised his own feelings to be able to do so with such relish. I dare say most preachers today tread very lightly on the subject of Hell, hoping not to offend, hoping not to be one of those 'fire and brimstone' preachers. We preachers are as vain as the next man, we want to appear sophisticated and in step with the thoughts of the day.

But whether Hell is in fashion or not, no one can deny that Jesus spoke about it. In fact, He spoke about it more than He did Heaven. And since most people, even unbelievers, respect the words of Jesus, we would do well to hear Him.

If there is anyone who can tell us what Hell is, if it exists, what it is like, it is Jesus. God the Son has always been, and He created the universe. He created Hell, for the Devil and his angels, we are told. So when God the Son came as a man and taught us, He knew all about life, death, afterlife, dimensions of existence other than Earth. We'd do well to listen.

We'd do well to listen because if Hell is real, nothing could be worse. No loss in this life could even begin to compare. Not being ridiculed in front of others; not being a victim of violent crime; not losing your health and succumbing to a dread disease; not an accident that leaves you crippled; not the pain of losing loved ones; not the loss of your health, money, reputation, family combined. All the pains, evils and sufferings of this life, that we do our utmost to avoid, will be nothing compared to what faces us there. To spend your life avoiding the pains of this life, only to enter an eternal misery, is a tragedy. If we can avoid it, we must.

Our Lord tells us about the seriousness of Hell, and the sin that leads us there. This passage challenges many current ideas about Hell.

Before we study these verses, let me explain what some of the current ideas about Hell are. As our world has globalised, as we have become more aware of the amount of peoples and cultures and religions, the question of Hell has vexed Christians. Are all these people wrong? Are all these people going to suffer in Hell for not believing in a message that only some know? So in the last hundred years or so, and even more so in the last thirty years, there has been a real resurgence of debate on what Hell is. Three major views exist.

The first is universalism. Universalism basically says that eventually everyone, universally, will be reconciled to God. It may take centuries, millennia, or longer, but in the end all people everywhere, and even Satan and his angels will come back to God. In this scheme, Hell is really a place of purging, a place of discipline, and training. Hell will lay siege to men's souls until they finally come to see and recognise that Christ is Lord. So in the end, no one will suffer in Hell eternally, because everyone will at some point, repent and believe and come out.

The second is annihilationism. Annihilationists teach that Hell is a place of destruction, where God snuffs out the souls of the unredeemed. Some believe in soul-sleep and say He simply doesn't raise them. Other say He raises them after a time of suffering in Hades, and then destroys them in Gehenna. Some say that Hell is where souls wear themselves out and die. But what it all comes to is that our souls are not immortal, and God will simply end the existence of those who reject Him.

The third is eternal, conscious punishment. This teaches that Hell is a place, and a state of being, where those who have rejected God live in eternal misery, ruin, and anguish. Some say the fire is literal, others say it is a symbol, but all agree that unredeemed sinners will spend their eternal existence in a place and state of suffering.

What does Jesus say? In this passage, we will learn two truths about Hell. Jesus is telling us of the awful reality of Hell, and the lengths we should go to avoid it.

I. Hell is An Eternal Dying

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to Hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched -- ⁴⁴ "where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.' ⁴⁵ "And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into Hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched -- ⁴⁶ "where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.' ⁴⁷ "And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into Hell fire

In these verses, you have the same idea repeated three ways. In fact, because of some differences in the ancient texts, the KJV and NKJV have the words of verse 48 three times, in verse 44, 46, and 48, while the modern versions do not. We'll come back to those words. For now, look at what Jesus says. He says the same thing three ways. Hand, foot and eyes. If your hand (what you do), causes you to sin, rather cut off that hand and maim yourself, so as to enter into Heaven, than keep your hand and end up in Hell.

If your foot (where you go), the direction of your life, your associations, your manner of life, causes you to sin, cut it off. Rather be a hobbled cripple and enter Heaven, than have both legs and feet and enter Hell.

If your eye (what you look at and the seat of your desires), leads you to sin, pluck it out. Better to have the great disability of a missing eye, and enter life and Heaven, than be fully sighted, and enter Hell.

Notice, Jesus contrasts two places, or two states of being. One Jesus calls life – 'enter into life', in verse 43 and 45, and in verse 47, he calls it the kingdom of God. The other place, or the other state of being, that Jesus speaks about is Hell, where Jesus says repeatedly, "Where the fire shall never be quenched". Jesus says the same thing in three ways. If something, no matter how precious, causes you to stumble, then lose it, refuse it, give it up, amputate it - no matter the pain, the cost, the loss,

for it is still better than facing Hell. We know that no one goes into Heaven in such a state, but Jesus is using a metaphor. Rather lose radically than the ultimate loss. Rather hurt painfully than the ultimate pain. Rather be disabled and crippled and suffer than the ultimate suffering. The terrible reality of Hell is worth maiming, crippling and blinding yourself to escape.

What is it about Hell that is so terrible, that you should do your utmost to escape?

Let me back up to describe the word Jesus was using. The word He uses for Hell is Gehenna. This was named after the Valley of Hinnom. The Valley of Hinnom was in the early days of Israel a lush and beautiful valley. As often happened, the idolaters in Israel chose these green, shady and lush places for their idol worship, particularly the evil worship of Molech, where children and infants would be killed on the altar.

Years later, Josiah, one of the bravest and best kings Israel ever had, enters the scene. Josiah went on a massive purge and reform to rid Israel of idolatry, impurity and wickedness. He destroyed idols wherever he found them. One of the things he did was that he went to the Valley of Hinnom and he filled the place with dead bodies. What did the presence of dead bodies mean? Defilement. No one wanted to go there any more.

By the time of Christ, this valley is simply called Gehenna, and it is the community garbage dump of Jerusalem. All the rot and refuse is taken there, and fire burns perpetually to burn it up. It is a place of continual burning, decay, stink and defilement.

Now, is Jesus talking about the Gehenna near Jerusalem? No. There is a real Gehenna, of which the earthly place was a fitting symbol and helpful analogy to understand.

So what does that tell us? It tells us that Hell is a place of continual dying. Gehenna was the place you threw out what was used up, finished, defiled and dirty. You took it there because garbage dumps are not placed in the middle of a nice town but away and outside and separate from life. Jesus contrasts entering into life, with entering into Hell. They are opposites. Hell is the place of continual death.

The reason people go there is because sin brings death. God told Adam that the day he sinned, death would come. Literally 'in dying, you will die.' Paul tells us that the wages of sin is death. Romans 5:12 tells us that:

¹² Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned --

Now here is where annihilationists get it so wrong. In the Bible, death is never extinction, or cessation. Death is separation. When Adam sinned in the Garden, on that very day, he died spiritually. He was cut off from communion with God. Ephesians 2 tells us that all of us, before we come to Christ are dead in our trespasses and sins. That doesn't mean we are unconscious or extinct spiritually. It means we are so cut off from God and His life and light, we live as if He is not there. We have no feeling, no love no desire for Him. We are separate from Him.

Gehenna, Hell, is the place where we go, if we have never received reconciliation with God, and we live as forever separate from God. We live forever away from the source of life. We live forever in a place where we are as far away from the felt presence of God as is possible in His created universe; away from the source of life, you are dead and forever dying.

What is that like? We cannot possibly begin to imagine. Every human that comes into this world lives in a world filled with God's goodness. Unknown to him, he lives in a universe so fine-tuned to keep him alive, that the scientists cannot explain it. He doesn't know, unless he's studied physics, that there are about 30 very exact physical constraints in our universe, but if any of those were changed by a fraction of a fraction, the universe would not exist. He doesn't know that he lives on a little planet that orbits a star in what's called the goldilocks zone; the perfect distance from the Sun to allow there to be liquid water, a temperature that averages between 14 and 30 C, a perfectly sized moon, the right kind of atmosphere, a perfectly balanced ecosystem, and weather cycle. He lives in a cradle. He is attached to a life-support system that would kill him were it even slightly changed. He is surrounded by God's goodness, by God's will for him to live and breathe and eat and drink, and look up and return thanks.

Hell is a place where God's presence is eclipsed. All that you knew as sweet life is removed. Fresh air is instead like sulphur. Bright clean light is now darkness. Nicely moderated temperature is now fiery anguish. And if someone says these are just symbols, perhaps they are, but I think the reality of those symbols is worse than the symbols.

We do not know the awful loneliness of being totally and finally separated from our Creator. John Donne, the poet and preacher, said, "When all is done, the Hell of hells, the torment of torments, is the everlasting absence of God...to fall out of the hands of the living God is a horror beyond our expression, beyond our imagination."

This is why Jesus uses two different words to speak of what happens when we die. For life, He keeps using the word 'enter'. You are welcomed, and brought into God's kingdom. But for Hell, Jesus uses the words 'depart' and 'thrown', 'cast'. Hell is the garbage dump of the universe, where you are thrown, tossed out, as far away from God as possible.

Why would people go there? Because they want to.

A Christian student was having a conversation with some other students, and one unbeliever asked the Christian, "Am I going to Hell?" The Christian responded, "Do you want to go?" The student looked confused. "Why would I want to go?" The Christian said, "God is who He is. Do you want to be with Him?"

You see, if you have spent your life avoiding God, hating any reference to a Creator or creation, despising any whiff of religion and its limits on your own freedom, angrily denouncing anyone who would judge you, why would you want to spend an eternity with a holy God? If your heart wants to love self more than anything else, and will not let self go, then why would you want to be in a place where everyone willingly and delightfully worships someone else?

I tell you that such a place would be a worse Hell for you. The presence of God, the face of Christ, the winds of joy and the storms of happiness in Christ would fill you with such an intense hatred and displeasure that you would be more tortured there than in Hell. You would be more burnt by the Holiness of God that you despise, than by any figurative or literal flames in Hell.

So Hell is where people who want to be separate from God go for all eternity. There will be no chains to keep you there, because it will be furthest from God. A place you hate but a place you don't want to leave. You will not like the darkness, but the other option will seem worse. This is why universalists are wrong. We have no evidence that people repent in Hell. They may regret being there, like the rich man in Christ's parable, who didn't want his relatives to join him. But I

might not want you to join me in Hell, and still have no desire to be in Heaven forever.

You see, those who hate wisdom, the wisdom of God's Word, love something else. Proverbs 8 tells us what that is.

Proverbs 8:36 ³⁶ *But he who sins against me wrongs his own soul; All those who hate me love death."*

The person who hates the life that God offers, loves his own sad, separate existence from God, which is death. And when that man leaves this life, God will put that man where he can do the minimum amount of damage to himself and the rest of God's moral creation. A place where that man can live his life of separateness from God forever. It will be horrible, but it will be what the man chose throughout his life, in countless ways.

In the end, like C.S. Lewis said, there are only two kinds of people. People who say to God, "Thy will be done, and people to whom God eventually says, "Thy will be done."

Jesus describes Hell as the opposite of life. It is where you are cast away, thrown, separated from God. But it is more than that. Not only is Hell a place and a state of eternal dying, Jesus tells us in this Scripture that

II. Hell is An Eternal Destroying

⁴⁸ *"where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.'* ⁴⁹ *"For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt. ⁵⁰ "Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another."*

Every time Jesus mentions Hell, He adds the phrase, *where the fire shall never be quenched*. In verses 44, 46, and 48, we have quotation from:

Isaiah 66:24 *"where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'.*

In literal Gehenna, there were, of course, always worms feeding in the decay and the fires kept burning. This is a symbol of perpetual decay, perpetual destruction, perpetual and ongoing decay and defilement.

Verse 49 carries this further.

⁴⁹ *"For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt.*

Salt was a preservative in ancient times, and the idea is that, just as every burnt offering was seasoned with salt, so unbelievers will be preserved and kept in eternal, conscious punishment.

Hell is not mere loneliness. This separation from God is a place of misery. It is a place of pain, of weeping, of regret. You will wish you had made other choices in life, but your unregenerate heart will still not desire to worship God. You will probably hate Him all the more. Someone said that in Hell, blasphemy is new every morning.

Is Hell really a place of physical fire? After all, can physical fire burn spirits like Satan and his angels? Can physical fire go together with darkness? I'll say this. If it is a symbol, then I think the reality must be worse than the symbol. If earthly fire is just a symbol of what Hell is, then the reality must be worse than physical fire. If God saw fit to make earthly fire, and use it to teach us, and say, your physical hand in this fire is like what Hell is.

Whether Hell is a literal Lake of Fire, or whether a Lake of Fire helps us imagine a reality far worse, I am content to say that Scripture describes Hell as conscious, eternal torment.

Here is where we hear people say, "How could a loving God send people to Hell? Is God some kind of cosmic torturer for an eternity? Where is the love in that?"

Let me give you four replies to that. First, Hell is eternal punishment because God is just. Every government has justice. God's government, God kingdom has justice. But there is no justice without judgement, and there is no judgement without retribution. In a just order, we do not merely rehabilitate offenders, we punish them. They are penalised. They experience a painful, negative consequence in response to their crime. How many times should Hitler or Stalin, or genocidal rapists experience punishment? Should moral monsters eat, drink, be merry, and then be extinguished? That leads me to the second response.

We judge how severe the crime is by how great or how innocent the offended one or victim is. For example, when one drug dealer murders another, we have one reaction. But when a man walks into a nursery school and slaughters children, we have another reaction – we judge that crime to be worse. When we hear that paramedics have been murdered or harmed while trying to save lives, we are angrier than usual. The goodness and innocence and honour of the one wronged tells us how great the crime is.

Who is sin ultimately against? How great is God's dignity? How great is God's innocence and purity? To sin against man is a finite crime, with finite punishment. But to sin against God is an infinite crime. To wound the loveliest One, and then, worse, to obstinately refuse His forgiveness, to justify ourselves, is a crime that makes Heaven sick.

Have you ever experienced a physical reaction to hearing about something evil? Do you think those who do those evils feel sick while they do it? No. Your conscience is still tender enough to feel revulsion at extreme sin. What do you think the Holy God feels towards any sin? God feels moral revulsion. He must get it out, drown it in purifying fire, keep it ever submerged in the white hot fire of His holiness that demands change.

Sin is an infinite offence, and so the punishment is a punishment with infinite duration. Hell goes on forever, because God's justice is never fully propitiated in Hell, otherwise he would let the people out. If there came a point when the infinite offences were paid for, they would then go to Heaven. But that day will never come, because the offence is infinite and therefore they will stay there forever. In Hell, God never says, "It is finished."

How can a loving God send people to Hell forever? Because there must be justice. Because sin is an infinite offence requiring an infinite punishment.

Third reason: People were made to live with God eternally. If they reject that, Hell is the only other alternative. In making eternal beings in His image, He exposed them to two eternal destinies – to live with Him forever, or to live apart from Him forever. You are not an animal. You are not a dog or a zebra, whose death is the end of consciousness and existence. Part of what it means to be made in God's image is to live forever. You might wish to be snuffed out of existence, but that is no more possible than it is for an animal to know God as a person. You will live forever. You will always exist. You will always have conscious existence. The question is, where? Where and in what state will you live forever?

Fourth reply to the objection to eternal punishment: Hell is not the same for all. Hell will be more bearable for some than others. Jesus says Hell will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for Capernaum and Bethsaida. Jesus said the servant who knew less of his master's will will be beaten with fewer stripes than the one who knew it. Millard Erickson said that the different degrees of punishment reflect the fact that Hell is "God's leaving a sinful human with the particular character that the person fashioned for himself or herself in this life." The misery of living with one's wicked self for an eternity. Part of God's punishment is to allow you to be the person you wanted to be for an eternity. He will leave people to themselves. Have you seen that? What do people say when people are left to themselves? You have glimpsed it. You have seen places where God's restraint seems to have been lifted. You have seen situations where everyone gets to be themselves. That's part of what Hell will be. A place where everyone gets to be themselves. A place where everyone gets to express themselves. A place where people are free, free to please themselves at the expense of others. Hell is sheer anarchy, where every man is king.

Can a loving God send people to Hell? A God who loves equity and justice will. He will send eternal beings to the only place they can go, and submerge their rebellion in cleansing fire that will bring perfect order to the universe. He will let them live their eternal selves in the consuming hunger and thirst of selfish desire. He will let them live in the selves they made for themselves and let them be forever the people they want to be, with billions of others who wanted the same thing.

What about those who've never heard about Jesus? I am happy to entrust the souls of all men everywhere to the wisdom of God. The same God who provided salvation knows how to dispense it. What about those who haven't heard of Jesus? I am happy to preach the Gospel to all nations, and leave the results to Him. The same God who taught us what fairness is will see to that. Shall not the Judge of the Earth do right?

I want you to see that the Son of God came here to warn us not to go there. He tells us in this passage to do anything, everything, no matter how radical to avoid going there. He tells us in verse 50 (picking up the image of salt from verse 49) like He said in the Sermon on the Mount, you need to be different, radically changed disciples, people who, by grace, make a difference. Otherwise, you are useless, and fit to be thrown out. Do your utmost to cut off sin, and to be righteous. To be different, to be peacemakers who do not lead others into stumbling.

So is that what Jesus means? Work hard to avoid Hell? No. Because less than six months after He spoke these words, He would be hanging on a cross. And there, on that cross, for three hours, while the skies darkened, Jesus experienced what Hell is – total separation from God. He experienced what it is to have the holiness of God immerse you in anger, drown you in displeasure. For three hours, your sins and my sins were laid upon Him, and when He looked up, He did not see Abba Father, but Holy Judge, counting Him as the Sinner. For three hours, He experienced, what I believe was the most intense form of Hell, a Hell that no one in Hell fully tastes, because they could not bear it. Humans are finite and so experience separation from God for an infinite period of time. Jesus was infinite, so He experienced the infinite wrath of God during a finite period of time.

Why did He do that? So that you may enter into life. He took God's wrath for you, so that you may live in delight with Him for an eternity. What must you do? Do what those who go to Hell refuse to do. Stop living as your own King. Stop living your life for yourself. Admit that God is your Creator and you owe Him life. Admit you have lived as a rebel against His goodness, and lived for yourself. Come to Him, and plead and receive the Son of God as your payment, as your penalty, as your new life.

Remember what He said? **Mark 8:34-37** ³⁴ *When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ³⁵ "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? ³⁷ "Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?*

Instead of wondering about those who have never heard, what about those who have heard? The issue is not them, it is you! You have heard about Jesus! You have been told. Why worry about those with less light than you have? Look to yourself! What have you done with the Gospel message? Have you come to God in Jesus? Have you called on Him? Has He changed you to where you are different, and making a difference? Has His grace changed you to where you are still willing to part with anything earthly to be with Christ, to enter into life?

If not, come today.

Ezekiel 33:11 *"Say to them: 'As I live,' says the Lord GOD, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?'*

Deuteronomy 30:19 *"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life.*