

Hell

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 August 2016

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] I'm not a fan of hell. I recoil at the very notion of eternal, unending punishment. But does it matter what I think or feel? Not one iota. My thoughts and the utter insignificance of them are well captured by words written by C.S. Lewis of Narnia Chronicles fame, taken from his book, The Problem of Pain. And he writes, there is no doctrine I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture, and especially of our Lord's own words. Think of these last words of the quote, our Lord's own words. And that is what we have in our passage this morning, the words of Jesus concerning this matter, the subject of hell.

And we're going to consider these words, the words of Jesus, with the aid of three headings that can guide our consideration of what Jesus declares. And the headings go as follows. First of all, hell described, at least in a measure, in the measure that the material that we have before us provides us with that information. Hell described. But then also, and again in a measure, hell explained.

But then finally, and importantly, we want to consider a third aspect of this matter, and that is hell escaped. How can we, how can you and me escape from this prospect of hell? So let's think of this matter under these headings. First of all, hell described. If we turn to the passage that we read there in Mark chapter 9, in the very first verse that we read, in verse 42, we have the first truth concerning hell that Jesus makes clear. And the truth is this, that hell is worse than death. There in that verse, Jesus is addressing serious grave sin, that of causing these little ones who believe in me to sin. He's saying that is a terrible thing to do, that is a grievously sinful thing to do, to be the reason for the cause of little ones, in this case the reference isn't to children, but to disciples of Jesus, so described, causing them to stumble, to sin, to fall away from the faith. He says that's a terrible thing to do. And in addressing this terrible thing to do, he then identifies the fate of those guilty of such a grievous, unforgiven sin. And Jesus says that the destiny of such is worse than death. You see, what he says there isn't that somebody who does that, well, they're going to be thrown into the sea and drowned. No, he doesn't say that. He says it would be better for them if that happened. That would be a better fate for such, for a millstone to be put around their neck and to be thrown into the sea. It's a horrible picture that Jesus paints. And it demands the question, well, what could be worse than that? If that's better, what could be worse than that? What could be worse than such a death? And the answer is clear, hell. Hell is worse than such a death.

So that's the first reality that Jesus makes clear as he broaches this subject, this solemn matter of hell. It's worse than death. But Jesus goes on to give further insight and description of hell in the very word that he employs. In the passage that we've read, the word hell appears on three occasions. And on each occasion, the word is translating an original Greek word. And the original Greek word that is translated by the English word hell is the word Gehenna. Now, Gehenna isn't really a Greek word. It's simply a transliteration of two Hebrew words. All that means is that the Hebrew words are brought into Greek in a similar sounding word. And the original Hebrew words refer not to a word or a noun, but a place, the valley of Hinnon. So the Hebrew words for valley of Hinnon became the Greek word Gehenna, which is translated by the English word hell to get the linguistic chain of events. Now, this valley that is the origin of this word hell has a story to tell that is significant for our understanding of hell and Jesus' use of the word. The Hinnon Valley was a ravine to the southwest of

Jerusalem where human sacrifices were offered by idolatrous kings of Judah. The kings in question were Ahaz and Manasseh, kings of Judah, but wicked kings who practiced idolatry to the vulgar extent of actually offering human sacrifices. And they did so in this location, the valley of Hinnon.

[6 : 03] We find in the Old Testament how the prophet Jeremiah vigorously condemns these kings for these abhorrent practices. In Jeremiah chapter 7, the prophet very roundly condemns them for their conduct. And then in time, the practice was abolished, and it was abolished by the godly king Josiah.

In 2 Kings, in chapter 23, we read of that, how Josiah, who was faithful to God, abolished this horrendous practice of offering human sacrifices in this valley. But Josiah didn't only abolish the practice. He also, in a gesture of righteous contempt towards such violent idolatry, he converted the ravine in question into a place of refuge. The rubbish tip of Jerusalem where all manner of refuse lay at various stages of putrefaction and a fire permanently smoldered. You can almost picture the scene of the rubbish there gathered, and it's been set fire to in order to consume it, but the fire never ends.

It's always smoldering as more rubbish is brought. And so Josiah, as I say, in this gesture of contempt towards the horrible things that had been done there, he converts this place into this place of refuse and destruction. Now in time, this place, this actual geographic location just outside of Jerusalem that had this history that I've just related, became a symbol or a picture of divine wrath and punishment. And for that reason, Jesus, perfectly aware and conscious of the history of the Word, uses the Word. And in so doing, he validates the reality it was known to symbolize. But not only does Jesus use the Word, he also quotes the final words of the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah chapter 66 and verse 24, the very last verse of the prophecy we read, and you'll recognize the words if you were attentive to our original reading in Mark's gospel. In Isaiah chapter 66, in the final verse we read, and the picture has been painted of the saints walking out of Jerusalem and looking on this valley that we've just described.

And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me. Their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind. And Jesus, as I say, not only uses the Word, but then He relates that Word to its origin, as He quotes from the prophet Isaiah, where in a very explicit way that place is identified not only as a place of torment, but as a place of punishment. The wicked will be there punished for their wicked deeds.

What are the implications of this word, and how does it serve to describe hell? Well, at the very least, we can say that it identifies hell as a place of torment and eternal punishment. In the very words from the prophet Isaiah that Jesus employs, in such a place, those who are there, their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. So, according to Jesus, according to our Lord's own words, hell is worse than death. Hell is a place of torment. Hell is unending. But as we identify these realities, maybe there are those who are questioning in their mind, or you're thinking, and quite rightly and legitimately, you're saying, but is it not the case that in the Bible's treatment of hell, the language used by Jesus, particularly the one who most speaks on the subject in the New Testament, the language that

[10 : 42] He uses, is it not picture language? This very idea of this valley that people could visualize. They knew about it, is that not picture language. And the answer, of course, is yes, it is picture language. It is not to be understood literally. That is so. In fact, if we were to think about the different pictures employed to describe hell, if they were understood literally, they would fall foul of the small difficulty of being mutually exclusive.

So, Jesus here speaks of hell as a place of fire. The fire is not quenched. It's the picture He employs here. But then, on another occasion, in Matthew chapter 8 and verse 12, He speaks of hell as a place of outer darkness. Now, if we were to take these two words, these two realities, literally, we have a problem because how can you have darkness and fire cohabiting? The pictures are mutually exclusive. And that is true. It can't be both. But both pictures, and this is important to be clear on, both pictures can and do serve to illustrate the reality. You see, when we speak about hell and we suggest on the basis of the scriptural evidence that what we have are pictures being painted, that there aren't literal flames of fire. There are perhaps some who say, oh, well, hang on a minute, is this not soft-peddling hell? Somehow seeking to dilute what the Bible says on this matter. But in actual fact, the reverse is the case.

The symbols or pictures are employed to try and present a reality that is more dreadful than any picture can convey. So far from diluting the awful reality of hell, the recognition that it is picture language that is being used serves to accentuate the horror of it. These are pictures that in some measure can convey a far greater and more horrendous reality. So in the words of Jesus, we have in some measure hell described. But we need to move on and think about the second heading, and that is hell explained. Can we explain hell? What is the reason for hell? What purpose does hell serve? It's clear from what Jesus says in our passage that he views hell as a place of punishment. Hell is punishment for sin. Hell is the punishment for those who cause others to sin, the example that he begins with that leads them in to broach the subject at all. He says hell is the just punishment for those who lead little ones to stumble or to sin. But then he moves on and he speaks of hell as the punishment for those who sin in themselves, who cause themselves to sin, we might say. And as he speaks of one's hand and one's foot and one's eyes causing to sin and the response to that, he's identifying these sins as being the reason, the cause for this punishment, the punishment of hell. Sin in all its multiple manifestations. The picture that is painted here by Jesus, and it's not a pretty picture, the painting that is pictured is of self-mutilation involving our hands, our feet, our eyes. And though clearly not intended as a literal option for sinners is intended to portray all manner of sin. I think it's almost definitively the case that each body part we find in this passage represents those sins associated with that part of the body. And between our hands and our feet and our eyes, that covers a whole lot of sin. And if you're a sinner and you are, you know that to be so. All such sin, all sin, be it related to or connected to your hands or your feet or your eyes or whatever else, all such sin is so serious that if bodily mutilation were able to save us from sinning, it would be worth it. As the punishment for such sin, hell is so awful. So, if it were possible to avoid sinning by doing what Jesus says here, then it would be worth it. Now, of course, Jesus knew, and we know that self-mutilation doesn't solve the problem. And the language that he uses, he uses simply to illustrate and highlight the gravity of sin. The gravity of sin and its punishment. The problem with sin, of course, is that its birthplace is in our hearts, and no removal of limbs will change that reality. So, hell is the punishment God has determined for sin, or more accurately, for the perpetrators of sin. And that would be you and me.

What do we make of this reality? What do we make of hell? Well, many, of course, perhaps most in our land within and indeed outwith, or outwith and within the church, many would reject hell as barbaric.

Others would argue that it's an invention of medieval churchmen designed to terrorize the naive into the clutches of the church. Others simply refuse to accept that Jesus could ever have taught such a cruel doctrine as it would be perceived. And even Christians, many of us perhaps, struggle with the doctrine, and the question is posed, is it fair? Is hell fair? Now, I don't for a moment wish to, or am able to respond exhaustively to that question. But in response to that question that could be posed, let me just say three things. Is hell fair? The three things I would say are this. First of all, hell is God's call. We believe in a God who is altogether righteous, altogether just, and altogether sovereign. It's His call to determine in perfect conformity with His character, with His righteousness, what is the right manner to express His anger towards and punishment of sin. It's God's call.

[17:57] It's His call. And if there is one thing that God does not need, is defense lawyers. We don't need to apologize for God. We don't need to defend what God has determined. It is His call, and He has made the call, and He has made it known to us clearly in the Bible. Regarding God's character and our confidence that anything He has determined conforms to His character, Moses hits the nail on the head when speaks of God in these terms. In Deuteronomy chapter 32 and verse 4 of God, He says, He is the rock. His works are perfect, and all His ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is He. And that is so.

And it is such a God who makes this call, and it's His call to make. But perhaps another thing we could say in response to the concern or the protest that hell is not fair is we could acknowledge or recognize that hell is our choice. Certainly there is a sense in which hell is our choice. Again, C.S. Lewis, who we quoted just a moment ago, expresses the matter with his customary clarity. And he says this, there are only two kinds of people. Those who say to God, thy will be done, and those to whom God in the end says, thy will be done. All that are in hell, choose it. Now to be clear in this, on this matter, we're not saying that hell is only our choice. It is in the first instant the punishment that God has determined for unrepentant sinners. But it is a punishment that in a sense we choose as we reject

God and His will in favor of ourself and our will. If songs are sung in hell, then I did it my way will echo eerily through its eternal corridors. Is hell fair? Well, it's God's call. It's our choice. But then let me say one further thing in connection with that concern. And it is this, that hell's alternative is awful. The alternative to hell is a God who doesn't judge or punish. Now to many that may seem a very attractive alternative, a God who is love and only love. Surely that is so much better. Of course, it's not for us to decide, but if it were, would that not be a better alternative? A God who is only love, a God who knows nothing of judging and punishing. But when we think about it, is that really such an appealing prospect. You see, with such a God, evil triumphs. And we are left with a world where wrongs are never righted, a world devoid of judgment, and a God incapable of punishing wickedness.

Such a God you could describe as the ultimate get-out-of-jail-free card for all manner of sin and sinners. No consequences, no accountability, no judgment, no punishment. That is a prospect more hellish than hell. Is hell fair? We'll just for a moment ponder on the alternative. Miroslav Volf is a Croatian theologian. He's quoted by Tim Keller in his book, *The Reason for God*. He witnessed something of the atrocities that were committed in the midst of the Balkan conflict. And in the light of his experience, he comments on this seemingly attractive notion of a God who does not judge or punish. And he says this, in a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it, such a view of God, will invariably die with other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind. Well, it's not just the liberal mind that can be so deluded. But you get the point that he's making. He says in the face of evil, the very prospect of a God who does not judge, of a God who does not punish, is an appalling prospect. When we're in the comfort of our homes, surrounded by the protection that our society affords, we might think, oh, what a beautiful thing it would be, a God who only loves and who never judges. But of course, the reality is quite different to our fantasy. In the face of the killing fields of Cambodia, the horrors of Aleppo, and the darkness of my own heart, hell is not only tolerable, it is indispensable. It is the absence of hell that would be evil. So we have, in these words of Jesus, in our Lord's own words, in a measure hell described, in a measure hell explained. But let's move on to the third thing we want to say, and that concerns hell escaped. Here we'll begin in what Jesus says. That will be our starting point, but then we'll move from it. Hell is awful. Hell's torment is beyond description.

It's far worse than the pictures employed to describe it. It is unspeakably terrible and dreadful, and it is the just punishment for sinners. We are sinners. Is there any way of escape?

[23 : 49] Maybe we do need to just confirm who are in danger. You see, in the popular conception of hell, inasmuch as there's any conception that remains in the popular mind, but in the popular conception of hell, hell is for the unspeakably wicked, for the pedophiles, for the mass murderers, for the serial rapists, for the butchers of Daesh, and we could go on. But is that the view held by Jesus? Who is Jesus speaking to when he addresses this solemn matter? Who is Jesus warning to flee from the sin that leads to hell? Who is he speaking to? He's speaking to his own disciples. He's addressing his own disciples, and to his own disciples. He says, beware. Beware of the fate that will befall those whose sin and whose sin is not forgiven. Beware. And so, who are in danger? We are all in danger.

Hell is the dangerous prospect that lies on the horizon for all of us. And so, the question is a very urgent one. How can we escape? And Jesus, in the passage, appears to propose a way of escape. And we say, good, what is it? What is this way of escape that Jesus presents for us? Well, the way of escape that Jesus suggests is, is put simply, don't sin. If you don't sin, you won't go to hell. Cut off your hand. Cut off your foot. Pluck out your eye. Don't sin. If you don't sin, you'll be all right. You won't go to hell. You won't merit the punishment that hell constitutes. That's the solution. That's the escape.

Stop sinning or don't sin. If we don't cause little ones to sin, and if we ensure that our hands never harm, and our feet never stray, and our eyes never wander, then we'll be all right. We will escape hell. But of course, this is the ultimate hypothetical escape. For that door of escape was slammed shut a long time ago. For we have sinned, and we do sin, and we will continue to sin. Not sinning as a means of escape is a non-starter for all of us. But thank God that is another way of escape open to all of us, a way of escape provided at great cost by God Himself. And that way of escape is Jesus. How so? Well, Jesus did not sin. He did not cause others to sin, and He Himself was altogether sinless. His hands never harmed.

His feet never strayed. His eyes never wandered. And yet, the one who was without sin died a sinner's death.

The one who was without sin bore the punishment of sin at Calvary. He, Jesus, bore the wrath or anger of God against sin as He died on the cross. Jesus endured hell for us on the cross.

[27:10] He became sin and bore there as He died the just anger and punishment of God towards sin. As we sung in the hymn that we sung a few moments ago, till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied. At the cross, the justice of God was satisfied, and the love of God was displayed. The cross, and only the cross, is our way of escape from hell. And so this morning I say to you, you who would consider yourselves disciples of Jesus Christ, as Jesus addressed His disciples, I say to you, cling to the cross.

Embrace Jesus. Repent of your sin and trust in the Savior, for this is the only way of escape from the awful reality of hell. This is good news for sinners. But there's more good news.

You see, the escape that Jesus provides is not only from hell, but to life. In the passage, Jesus describes that welcome alternative as entering life. Then in verse 43, He speaks in those terms, it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell. You see, there are these two alternatives, and what we're discovering here is that Jesus not only has provided for us, for you, an escape from hell, but an escape to life. And the life that He speaks of here, that He speaks of here also as the kingdom of God in a subsequent verse, is what He speaks of in other parts of the Gospels, as eternal life. That is what He is speaking of. And so this glorious way of escape that God has provided for sinners not only frees us and liberates us and permits us to escape from hell, but it liberates us to everlasting life. Life in fellowship and friendship with God in the present and for all eternity.

This is what God has done for you. This is the escape that He provides for you. Will you grasp it?

And I would say to you as we close, I would say this, choose life. Escape hell. Trust in Jesus. Let's pray.

[29 : 51] Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the manner in which all matters of consequence are addressed. We thank you that matters of eternal consequence are addressed. We thank you for what we discover on a matter that is so horrific to us even to think about. But we pray that we would have the good sense to grapple with matters that we must grapple with, to consider and to ponder on what Jesus says about our eternal destiny, about what awaits unforgiven sinners. But we thank you very especially that in the light of such a dreadful prospect, we are given graciously and lovingly a way of escape in the person of your son Jesus. We thank you for him. We thank you for what he has done. We thank you for the death he died. We thank you that he endured hell for us, that we might be spared.

We pray that by your spirit you would help us, each and every one, to deposit our trust in Jesus, repenting of our sins, repenting of our sins, and trusting in him. And we pray all of these things in his name. Amen.