

“Jesus Taught about Hell” – Addenda

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The following are some additional ideas that I didn't have time to discuss in my sermon, “Jesus Taught about Hell.”¹

Other Objections to Hell

In the sermon, I mentioned two objections to hell. One is the idea that if hell exists, God is cruel. The other is the belief that if hell exists, Christians would be cruel. You can see how I dealt with those objections if you listen to the sermon or read the manuscript.

I found a third objection to the notion of hell. This was voiced by Keith Parsons, an atheist. He believes that “hell is the penalty for disagreeing with Christians.”² In other words, Parsons believes that Christians go around saying, “Agree with us or you'll go to hell!” According to Parsons, “Hell is the ultimate *argumentum ad baculum*: Do what we say, indeed, think what we think, or suffer consequences too horrible to contemplate.”³ The *argumentum ad baculum* is an informal fallacy, “the argument to cudgel/stick.” In other words, it's an “argument” that is really a veiled (or not-so-veiled) threat.

I don't think this objection has much merit. The only way it could be true is if Christians invented the notion of hell. Yet if God has revealed that the fate of all who reject him is indeed hell, the message of the Christian is not, “Agree with us or you'll go to hell!” No, the message is, “Agree with God or you'll go to hell!” And that's an entirely different notion. As I said in the sermon, I am simply a messenger. The message of Christianity is not one I fabricated, nor is it one I have the right to edit. I am an ambassador for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). An ambassador represents a nation; he or she relays messages. He or she does not invent the message (foreign policy, or, in this case, the gospel of Jesus Christ).

The real issue here is truth. If hell is true, the Christian is not trying to force the non-Christian to believe anything. The Christian is simply trying to warn the non-Christian of a reality that will come. If I say, “File your taxes by April 15 or you'll be penalized,” I'm not

¹ This sermon was presented on March 22, 2015 and is available at <http://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

² Keith Parsons, “Heaven and Hell,” in *Debating Christian Theism*, ed. J. P. Moreland, Chad Meister, and Khaldoun A. Sweis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 537.

³ *Ibid.*, 543.

saying, “Agree with me or you’ll be penalized,” and I certainly would not be saying, “File your taxes by April 15 or *I* will penalize you.”

I suppose there’s a fourth objection, a general objection to the very notion of hell. Some people simply think it’s offensive. But why should we expect that things in the Bible won’t offend us? Tim Keller responds well to this objection. “For the sake of argument, let’s imagine that Christianity is not the product of any one culture but is actually the transcultural truth of God. If that were the case we would expect that it would contradict and offend every human culture at some point, because human cultures are ever-changing and imperfect.”⁴ If the Christian story is true, we are in need of correction, not God. So we should expect that aspects of Christianity will confront us, challenge us, and possibly even offend us. But that doesn’t mean they are wrong.

Fire Is a Metaphor

The Bible’s teachings on hell are metaphors. This does not mean the Bible’s teachings are untrue. However, because we cannot imagine the horror of hell (nor can we fully imagine the bliss of heaven), it is necessary for God to communicate to us in metaphorical and analogical ways. So, we are told that hell is like a fire that burns forever. But we’re also told that hell is “outer darkness.”

Jesus taught that hell is both fire and darkness. For example, here are some of his mentions of the fire of hell:

Matthew 5:22: But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Matthew 18:8: If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.

Matthew 25:41: Then he 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.

Yet Jesus also describes hell as “outer darkness”:

⁴ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 75.

Matthew 8:12: But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

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Matthew 25:30: And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Hell can't be both fire and darkness, or else there would be a contradiction in the Bible. After all, a blazing fire would light up hell, not leave it dark. But I don't think that's the point. The fire of hell reminds us of the destruction that took place at Gehenna, when children were sacrificed to idols and trash was burned. Burning is an awful image, and all the hell-fire images make think of an unbearably hot environment with no water. I think of bodies burning without being consumed.

On the other hand, outer darkness makes me think of cold. I imagine someone walking outside on a pitch-black night in the coldest weather we can imagine, with the sun never rising, nor the moon emitting light, and no hope of warmth.

Yet these are just images. The reality, I suppose, is infinitely worse. Hell is simply the absence of anything good. Since all good gifts come from God (James 1:17), and since hell is outside the city of God, so to speak, then hell has nothing good in it. Right now, even in this fallen world, there are many good things. God gives good things to those who are his children and those who are not (see Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:15-17). We call this “common grace.” God is merciful and gracious, even to those who now reject him. But in hell, there is no common grace. There is no goodness in hell. There is no “living water” for those on fire. There is no light for those in the dark. “Living water” is used to describe the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39) and God is often associated with light (John 8:12). God does not dwell in hell, so there will be no goodness there. And we can't even imagine what that would be like, so the best we have are horrifying images. But the reality will be much, much worse.

Annihilation (Conditional Immortality) or Eternal Conscious Torment?

The traditional view of hell is that it goes on forever. Those in hell, we believe, experience eternal conscious torment. Yet the view that those who are condemned are destroyed at the final judgment has been held by several Christians, and this view seems to be gaining more traction. This view is often called “annihilationism.” Sometimes, it is called “conditional

immortality.” That second term refers to the idea that the traditional view of hell entails: that God made all humans to be immortal. Some will live on forever with God, and some will live on forever apart from God, or so the traditional view holds. Conditionalists believe immortality is conditioned on whether one has a right relationship with God: if one is declared righteous on the basis of faith in Jesus, then he or she is immortal. Yet if one lacks such status, one will be annihilated.⁵

Annihilationists believe that the “destruction” language that we find in the Bible should be taken quite literally. Jesus says God can kill the soul (Matt. 10:28) and Paul says when Jesus returns, his angels will punish those “who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” with “everlasting destruction.” They believe that when we read of “eternal fire,” it means that the damned are burned quickly, their corpses consumed. It is the result of the fire that is eternal. The same thing is true of the “worm [that] will not die” in Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:48. The worm will not die, but will eat up the corpses of those sent to hell. Eternal destruction is the everlasting result of a temporal destruction of the damned.

In my studies this week, I found that the case of annihilationism is stronger than I imagined it would be.⁶ Yet I find this case not strong enough to persuade me. One reason I find the case not compelling is exegetical.⁷ The other reasons are more theological and philosophical.

First, let’s look at the exegetical argument. Let’s say most of the biblical passages on hell can be read from either a traditional view or the conditionalist/annihilationist view. That is, let’s say that one can interpret “eternal destruction” as either a process of destruction that lasts forever or a destruction in time that has an eternal consequence. I think it’s possible that most texts on hell could be read legitimately either way. But I don’t think one can text can. In Revelation 20, we read of the final defeat of Satan and a final judgment. Verse 10 says, “And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” Then, in verse 15, we read, “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” So, the lake of fire (which, again, may just be an image for a reality that is far, far worse) is

⁵ See the entry on “Annihilationism” at Theopedia: <http://www.theopedia.com/Annihilationism>.

⁶ I primarily looked at Edward William Fudge, “The Case for Conditionalism,” in Edward William Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000).

⁷ The word “exegesis” comes from a Greek verb that means “to lead out.” It refers to the process of discovering what is in a text. So, when theologians talk about exegesis, they are talking about the details of a text, not abstract philosophies or theological systems.

where Satan will be tormented forever. And those who have not been credited Jesus' righteous, but who are judged by their own works, are also thrown into the lake of fire (a point reiterated in Rev. 21:8). It stands to reason that those people will also be tormented forever.

Edward Fudge, a conditionalist, does not believe that this language means humans will be tormented forever. He writes,

If the beast and false prophet symbolize wicked governments and false religion, they will be totally wiped out. That is clearly what the lake of fire means in the case of death and Hades [which, according to v. 14, are also cast into the lake of fire]. If the beast and false prophet stand for some kind of personal beings, their fate is different from that of lost men and women as consistently described throughout the rest of the Bible. John does say that certain humans will end up in the fiery lake, but each time he mentions humans, he is careful to explain that the lake of fire means the 'second death' (Rev 20:14-15; 21:8). The contrast to this unending death [his words!] is everlasting life (Rev 20:15; 21:4, 6; 22:1-2).⁸

Whether or not the beast and the false prophet represent personal beings or impersonal institutions, Satan is a personal being and he is tormented forever. Why should humans who fall into the lake of fire experience a different fate? This strikes me as special pleading. Satan and humans are created beings. Why should one be immortal and the other conditionally immortal? If much of the language of hell is symbolic and metaphorical, why cannot the second death mean an unending process of dying? Even Fudge seems to have acknowledged as much by referring to "unending death." Yes, elsewhere in the Bible it says those who do not know God will be destroyed. But Hebrews 2:14 says that Jesus will destroy the devil. Perhaps "destruction" is a process that extends into infinity. That is a gruesome thought, but one that we should not reject simply because we don't like it.

One of the more convincing arguments for the traditional view of eternal conscious torment comes from Joshua Ryan Butler, a pastor in Portland, Oregon, and the author of the recently published *The Skeletons in God's Closet*.⁹ Many of the concepts I used in my sermon are presented by Butler. In one section of his book, he thinks of how a prominent metaphor in the Bible, the relationship between God and his people as a marriage, relates to the issue of hell. Some theologians have thought that at Mount Sinai, God "marries" Israel.¹⁰ Jesus is clearly the

⁸ Fudge, "The Case for Conditionalism," 78-79.

⁹ Joshua Ryan Butler, *The Skeletons in God's Closet: The Mercy of Hell, the Surprise of Judgment, the Hope of Holy War* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014).

¹⁰ The Sinai covenant ceremony resembles a marriage ceremony (Exod. 24). Isa. 54:5 states

“bridegroom” of the church, his “bride.”¹¹ Idolatry, the worship of false gods, is likened to adultery. With that background in mind, Butler shows why God cannot ignore evil, and why annihilationism and universalism are wrong.

First, God cannot simply ignore evil. At least, God cannot bring about a new creation in which he dwells without his people while also ignoring sin. “To bring sin into God’s city is to bring our old lovers [our idols] into God’s honeymoon suite. And our old lovers want to tear that suite apart. . . . Our world is redeemed *from* sin and *to* God. For God to ignore unrepentant sin in the new creation would be to make a farce of redemption; it would say implicitly that creation hadn’t truly been redeemed.”¹²

Second, annihilationism may seem, at first glance, to be more merciful than the traditional view of hell. “At its core, it is like God saying, ‘Marry me or I’ll kill you.’ If you knew a guy who asked the love of his life to marry him, you would hope he would have the maturity if she rejected the proposal to simply move on and let her go her own way. If he killed her for turning him down, we would think him small, vindictive, and cruel. And we would lock him up as a criminal.”¹³ Butler observes that God is more merciful to let those who refuse a relationship with him to go their own way.

Third, some people think that, in the end, all will be redeemed. Some people believe, or at least suggest, that God will eventually win everyone over. The hope here is that God will give everyone a second chance after death to accept his free offer of forgiveness. Butler finds this idea problematic: “It is like God saying, ‘Marry me or I’ll lock you in the basement until you learn to love me.’ We know from common courtesy and everyday experience that the most mature response to a rejected marriage proposal is not to abduct the unrequited lover and lock her in your basement, but simply to let her go her own way.”¹⁴

The traditional view of hell is actually the best option. “God lets the marriage-rejecters go their own way, and contains the destructive power of their sin ‘outside the city’ to prevent them

For your Maker is your husband—
the LORD Almighty is his name—
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;
he is called the God of all the earth.

¹¹ See Eph. 5:22-33, as well as Rev. 19:6-9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 63.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

from crashing the wedding.”¹⁵ God will protect his bride from evil, and he will keep all the wedding crashers out of his eternal wedding feast.

A Final Thought

If the “second death” means an unending process of dying, what does this look like? How does an eternal destruction, a never-ending process of being destroyed, work? I imagine that those who are in hell will become less and less human. Barred from any contact with the source of goodness, God, they become more and more a shadow of what God intended them to be. Again, I’ll turn to the wise words of Tim Keller:

A common image of hell in the Bible is that of fire. Fire disintegrates. Even in this life we can see the kind of soul disintegration that self-centeredness creates. We know how selfishness and self-absorption leads to piercing bitterness, nauseating envy, paralyzing anxiety, paranoid thoughts, and the mental denials and distortions that accompany them. Now ask the question: “What if when we die we don’t end, but spiritually our life extends on into eternity?” Hell, then, is the trajectory of a soul, living a self-absorbed, self-centered life, going on and on forever.¹⁶

The person in hell must continue to become more selfish, more self-absorbed, more anxious, less at peace. In other words, the person in hell becomes increasingly isolated and bitter.

As I think about all of this, I start to imagine the zombies on the television show, *The Walking Dead*. In the world of that show, all humans are infected with a type of virus. Upon death, they become flesh-eating zombies. The zombies continue to “live” (unless they’re shot/stabbed/struck in the head), roaming the earth in search of a meal, disintegrating forever, but they are not quite human. Perhaps that’s what hell is. On the show, the zombies, in their own way, “weep and gnash their teeth” (to echo language that Jesus uses in Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28).

C. S. Lewis seems to think the same thing. I’ll end with his words about “destruction,” words that make a strong case against annihilationism, at least in my view.

Destruction, we should naturally assume, means the unmasking, or cessation, of the destroyed. And people often talk as if the ‘annihilation’ of a soul were intrinsically possible. In all our experience, however, the destruction of one thing means the emergence of something else. Burn a log, and you have gases, heat, and

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 79.

ash. To *have been* a log means now being those three things. If soul can be [pg. break] destroyed, must there not be a state of *having been* a human soul? And is not that, perhaps, the state which is equally well described as torment, destruction, and privation? You will remember that in the parable, the saved go to a place prepared for *them*, while the damned go to a place never made for men at all [Matt. 25:34, 41]. To enter heaven is to become more human than you ever succeeded in being in earth; to enter hell, is to be banished from humanity. What is cast (or casts itself) into hell is not a man: it is “remains.”¹⁷

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 111-112.