

Scriptures:

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

## **What the Hell**

I had a conversation this week with someone who had recently been told that because of their sinful behaviour they would most certainly be going to hell. They were urged to turn from their evil ways and follow the Jesus way so that they would find their way to righteousness and the kingdom of heaven.

Somewhere along the line people/ religious people got fascinated with the concept of hell. The word hell, in the Old Testament, is a translation of the Hebrew word Sheol, meaning hell, grave or pit. Its primary meaning is the place or state of the dead. In the Hebrew Scriptures there is no reference to a place of endless torment after death. Sheol was a place where everyone went - good or bad - after they died.

Hades actually came from metaphorical a pagan Egyptian concept of the underworld. The theology of Hell grew probably starting in the 5th century, or perhaps later, in western Europe. The Gospel of Nicodemus, advanced the vision of Hell, in Latin and was likely written in the central or western Empire. Many changes entered Christianity when it expanded westward, such as a greater emphasis on the priesthood and hierarchy. The great eastern Church Fathers, on the other hand, were relatively unconcerned with it. We see mention of Hell in works such as those of Tertullian.

When the Hebrew text was translated into Greek, "Sheol" was replaced by "Hades." Then, when evolving Jewish and Christian beliefs began to emphasize resurrection, Hades became a place where only the nasty folks went.

The third name for Hell in early Christian teaching was Gehenna rooted from the Valley of Hinnom a location south of Jerusalem, where trash fires burned incessantly and where ancient human sacrifices had been offered to Canaanite Gods. This is that word found in our text today. It was a landfill where the garbage is burned and where the bodies of soldiers or criminals were burned. "The Book of Revelation took this a step further by saying those evil folks would be "thrown into a lake of fire." Still so far, no mention of "Hell." That changed when the Bible was translated into English. Many versions render Sheol, Hades, and Gehenna as Hell. The New

Testament also refers to “weeping and gnashing of teeth” and a place where the “worm never dies and the fire is never quenched,” and things like that.<sup>1</sup>

I say all of this because the fascination with a fiery place that people go to if they don't follow the right path as dictated by a certain theology it is a concept that has developed over time. It is a human concept and as the bible was translated into English and as theologians, and church leaders began to see that if they didn't keep people in line they just might go astray the concept got larger and more in depth and rather than a metaphorical concept of your soul suffering if you were not 'good or righteous' it became a physical place a place where you would go if you didn't follow a certain set of rules.

You may or may not have heard me say I actually believe that Hell exists here on earth. I have seen people go through what I perceive to be hell. Of course I don't mean a fiery underworld I mean we do through dark nights of the soul. I mean we struggle beyond understanding. I mean there are people who actually end their life here in this world because it is too painful to exist in. That to me is hell. Do I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is no fiery underworld? I am pretty sure I do but I had it so engrained in me all my life it even feels scary to say so. That is the sin of our human nature and reconstruction of text and story and theology.

Even in our scriptures today the original text it only spoke of hell one time and so as to emphasize the point later translators added the line of the “where the worm never dies and, and the fire is never quenched” two more times.

Now let me be very clear before we go on any further. I also believe that heaven can exist right here on earth. It is found in beautiful moments of life as our breath is taken away from beauty and love. As we gasp at creation at the top of a mountain or the edge of the ocean, as we hold our newborn babe, as we experience love from a partner that is so real and true... you can name your heavenly moments. Just as I am sure you have name some hellish ones.

We get so focused on this concept because it has been taught us. Every tradition has a concept of a heaven and hell, of an afterlife because in our human nature we want an answer. As I prayed with our friend Rainer a few times over the last weeks he had such a peace beyond understanding - he knew he would be okay. I remember that with Bert and with Linda and with Ev. And that is the gift of our Christian story and I would never want to take that away but what I have come to know is that when we are ready to 'lay down in those green pastures' even as we 'go through the valley of the shadow of death' God is with us, we are not alone and that I have come to know beyond a shadow of a doubt. I have never been in such holy moments as those, such moments of peace as those and for that I am truly grateful.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/1853/who-invented-hell/>, <https://www.quora.com/Where-and-when-did-the-concept-of-Hell-originate>

And I believe in a creating loving God who loves us all and longs for all our souls to rest and be at peace one day. And so the concept of that loving creator suddenly turning his or her back on me because I 'messed up' Just doesn't equate.

The problem is that most who feel the need to focus on hell focus on it in a way that convicts other people to it. Now I suppose if you really believe I am going to hell because of my actions and beliefs it would be offensive for you not to tell me. I know many believe I am going to hell. And I appreciate any prayers that might be offered in my name but Jesus' point is that you are not to look at the evils of others you are to offer love and hope. Actually simply offer a cup of water. Jesus says in this scripture - stop judging and start loving.

Jesus says if you are not going to love you are going to be in hell and you are putting others in it. "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." (Mark 9:50) Unfortunately our human nature is found in our traditions. We have a need to know what is right and what is wrong, who is in and who is out. Even the disciples in today's passage are attempting to say - that person is doing good but he wasn't doing it in your name Jesus so we told him to stop. How dare these people offer hope and healing and it not be Christian. That kind of love doesn't count they are saying. And Jesus says - get over yourselves - why would you stop someone from being healed? Why would you halt the presence of love and hope.

So many years of teaching and theology swirl through my mind as I read this scripture. We live in a world focused on fear, on power, on evil. My heart breaks when I hear the teachings of condemnation that come out of some churches. We are so afraid of what we do not know or understand that we make up our own concepts and stories. We rewrite the bible to fit our truth, to find ways to bring others into line and yet Jesus says your reward is not found if you tow the party line. You will receive a reward as you welcome a child, as you offer a thirsty person a drink of water, as you create places and experiences of hope and healing and grace. And the eternal salvation and reward of faith is found in the moment, in the place of healing in the place of love and hope and grace.

There is so much in our media, in our world right now that oozes evil. It would be so easy for us to sink into a place of fear and despair with all that is being thrown at us and yet all I want us to do as individuals and church is offer light and love in the midst. That is all we can do. A little bit of salt goes a long way. Be salt and light today.

Amen