

Life After Death (3): Hell and Judgement

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[0 : 00] Well, just over 50 years ago, the Beatles invited the world to imagine. Imagine there is no heaven.

It's easy if you try. No hell below us, above us only sky. Imagine all the people living for today. You probably know those words.

They're famous words. They've kind of stuck, haven't they, in our popular imagination. But you don't need to know them because today most people don't have to imagine a world like that.

50 years ago in 1971 when that song was released, people had to imagine a world without heaven, without hell. Today most people see that world, a purely here and now world of time and chance and matter to be just the default, the obvious way to see and to live in the world.

And any suggestion of a reality beyond what we can see or taste or touch sounds like a flight of imagination.

[1 : 12] But it's helpful for the Beatles to remind us that that is not true, that heaven and hell had to be imagined away.

At the other end of the kind of cultural spectrum, the philosopher Charles Taylor in his book, *A Secular Age*, points out that a universe without God and without a transcendent moral authority, without judgment, without any final destiny, had to be carved out of a world where people were conscious that God existed and knew that he would judge the world at the end of time.

And whether everyone responded to that knowledge rightly or not is another thing. But if we could speak to the ordinary man or woman 100, 200 years ago or before, and a world without a final judgment would have seemed simply beyond belief.

And I want to start there tonight because we all, whether we're Christians or not, whether you know it or not, we all came here tonight with a security blanket given to us by our culture not so very long ago.

It's a secular security blanket that says, this isn't what the universe is really like, what we've just read out of the Bible. That's not, that's not real.

[2 : 41] Okay, just hold on tight for the next half hour, 40 minutes, and then you'll wake up back in the real world and you can carry on living life. Or even what you're going to hear tonight is potentially dangerous or traumatizing.

You need to hide yourself from it, protect yourself from what you're about to hear. Let me invite you this evening to do something different then as we begin.

And let me invite you to let Jesus lovingly and gently and kindly take that security blanket away from you.

Let me invite you to let me invite you to let me invite you to let me invite you to let me invite you to let me invite you to let me know. Let me invite you not to imagine, but to listen. Because it's Jesus himself who has the most to say about hell and judgment.

Did you know that? That most, most of what we find out, most of what we hear about hell and judgment in the Bible comes from the mouth of Jesus in the Gospels. Both our readings tonight have been Jesus speaking to us in the Gospels.

[3 : 48] And let me assure you tonight that Jesus is not out to get you. He does not say these things to manipulate us or scare us, but to show us how the universe really is.

And to warn us to respond to God rightly while we have the chance. And to reveal to us what it was he came to save us from. It's not a loving thing, is it?

To hide the truth from someone, however hard it is. None of us want to live a lie, do we? You want to live in the world as it really is, real lives.

So let Jesus just now, just take that lie from you and sit down with you himself this evening. And tell you about what our sin deserves.

And what he took for those who he came to die for. We're going to begin tonight thinking about what that is. What that was he took.

[4 : 46] What is hell? We're starting with our longer point this evening. And we'll move through applications as we go. So if the Bible defines heaven as the place where God's presence is most fully revealed.

We thought about that last time. Then it defines hell as the place where God's punishment for sin never ends. We've read from Matthew 25.

When the Son of Man, when Jesus himself sits in judgment, 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.

Then they will go away to eternal punishment. But the righteous to eternal life. Hell is prepared by God as a place of punishment. And Jesus uses lots of ways to help us to grasp how total that punishment is.

Just twice in that short story we heard from him in Luke 16, he uses the word agony or torment. He uses lots of images, as he does here, to hint at the scope and the intensity of that punishment.

[5 : 56] Their worm never dies. Fire that is never quenched. Outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And that is not a photograph of hell or even a really detailed description. That is Jesus suggesting to us something that is beyond our capacity to comprehend or imagine.

A spiritual reality that words cannot capture. And so whatever relational or psychological or spiritual or physical suffering those words and images convey to us, and if we just dwell on them, they are horrific.

Or they only hint at the relational and psychological and spiritual and physical suffering, agony and ruin, that is prepared in hell for unrepentant sinners.

And Jesus is clear that it is punishment that awaits. If I asked you the question, why do prisons exist?

[7 : 05] Your answer would probably fall into one of two categories of kind of theories of criminal justice. That's sort of restorative justice. The idea that prisons exist mainly to correct or to reform a criminal so they don't recommit crimes once they're released.

Or retributive justice. The idea that prisons exist to punish crimes that have been committed. Now generally, our justice system has moved away from the idea that crimes deserve punishment to the idea that criminals only really need to be corrected and set on a right course.

And part of our struggle with the doctrine of hell is that hell doesn't do that. Hell is not restorative in any way.

It does not correct. It does not sanctify. Hell is wholly retributive. It tells us that our sins deserve God to punish them.

Sins we have committed. Not put us right. And that is a sobering and a fearful thought. George Bernard Shaw, who's an Irish playwright, he once casually remarked, all the interesting people will be in hell.

[8 : 23] Perhaps you've heard someone joke like that. That hell will be better than heaven, surely, because that's where the party will be, all the interesting, all the fun, all the cool people.

No. One Bible teacher, David Jackman, says chillingly, there will be no such thing as friendship in hell. It is outer darkness, separation.

And we even as Christians in the church often get this wrong and the wrong way around. We talk about hell being separation from God. And what's left of hell in the popular imagination is sort of all the fun, all the interesting people together and out of sight of God.

God is somewhere else, leaving people in hell to get on with life as they want it to be. The Bible says it's the opposite of that. Hell is to be cut off from everyone except God.

In the words of David Gibson, hell is the presence of God without a mediator. Our sin exposed to a holy God for eternity and without a covering.

[9 : 36] Does that not make you tremble? Does that not chill you to think? That is the thought that made Jesus sweat and cry with fear in the garden before his death.

The thought of being hung before God, carrying the sins of all his people, fully exposed to God's holy wrath and without a covering. If that does not break us like it broke our Lord, we do not yet

understand.

That is what it means to say that he suffered hell for us on the cross, that he was tormented in the presence of God with no one to plead for him on his behalf.

Listen to Revelation chapter 14. If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or hand, that is whoever rebels against God and Christ, they too will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath.

They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. In the presence of the Lamb, and the smoke of their torment will rise forever and ever.

[10:52] There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast in its image or anyone who receives the mark of its name. Friends, if you do not take hell seriously tonight, and even if you're not sure whether you believe that hell is real, surely the prospect of that should make you sit up and take it seriously.

If you are not a Christian, if you are not assured of your salvation, hell should weigh heavy on you. It should play on your mind, not, as I say, to crush you, but to compel you to Jesus, who suffered hell in our place, to trust in him to save you from this most fearful punishment, because hell is God's forever punishment for our sin.

And the Lord Jesus, crucified for us, is our only savior from that punishment. But perhaps you're thinking, well, how can sins committed in a lifetime, 70, 80 years, deserve a punishment that goes on forever?

Where is the justice in that? How does that work? A guy called Edward Donnelly has a book, Heaven and Hell, which I found really helpful, actually, on this whole subject. He points out, even a momentary sin has an eternal dimension, because it is against the God, who is infinite.

Imagine, just for a minute, if yesterday, on his way to Westminster Abbey, the king had been assassinated. In one way, that would be as evil, wouldn't it, as taking any life.

[12:36] He is an image bearer of God, but our sense of justice says that it would be worse because of who it is that has been killed. Not only murder, but high treason.

And we would expect the punishment to reflect the severity of the crime, who it was against. And so then take that further, not only another image bearer, but God himself.

Think of it, when the Lord of glory came to earth, what did we do with him? We crucified him. We crucified him. We crucified him. Such is our sin, that it required the death of the eternal son of God to be put right.

Zechariah says, with our sins, we pierced God. Not only high treason, but sin against the holy, eternal, and infinite God, the one true and living God.

That is what Donnelly is getting at. Our momentary sins against him, even in our hearts, have eternal consequences because they're directed against the God who is eternal.

[13:40] And even if our sins were not that serious, again, hell does not stop anyone from sinning. It's not corrective. And so those in hell keep on sinning against God, even as those in heaven keep on serving God for as long as they are there.

And so there is no end of punishment because there is no end of sin. Listen again to Jesus. They will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

Do we see the parity there? Eternal punishment, eternal life. We cannot have one without the other friends if we are listening to the Lord Jesus. J.R. Packer says, an endless hell can no more be removed from the pages of the New Testament.

than can an endless heaven. And so when does that punishment begin that goes on forever? Well, last time we talked about heaven in the intermediate state.

Remember, the soul and the body separated until Christ comes to reunite the soul and the body in the resurrection. Well, it is the same timeline with hell, but the opposite.

[14:54] Okay, here's the Westminster Confession, chapter 32. Upon death, it says, the souls of the wicked are cast into hell where they remain in torment and utter darkness reserved to the judgment of the great day.

So that is the reality Jesus is describing in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the soul of the rich man in torment upon death. But with Christ's return, those souls will be raised, resurrected to stand before the judgment throne of God.

And then, says Revelation 20, comes the second death when Christ sits on his throne to judge. This is what John sees. The sea gave up the dead that were in it and death and Hades gave up the dead

that were in them.

And each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. And so, this punishment then never ends. It begins the moment a person dies outside of Christ and it carries on forever.

[16:09] So that just as life gets better for souls in heaven when Christ returns to bring a new creation, so death gets worse when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead, to cast them bodily into the lake of fire.

And that is overwhelming to think about. You'd think about it too long would distress us to tears, wouldn't it? To dwell on this idea, this fact.

But doesn't that overwhelming reality of hell only deepen the urgency then of the solution? Friends, we have one chance to repent before our fate is sealed forever.

That is what Jesus says. This life is it. We die once, then we face judgment. And so it is not enough to put off thinking about it, is it?

It is not enough just to hope beyond hope vaguely that someone might have picked up and thought about and believed the good news of Jesus in our life.

[17:16] Charles Spurgeon once preached, if sinners be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped around their knees, imploring them to stay.

If hell must be filled, he said, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions and let not one go unwarned or unprayed for. We cannot save anyone from going to hell, but would we do anything in our power for others to be saved?

Isn't it worth this week putting our foot in it, saying something that is unpopular, risking the shame if it would spare someone this destiny?

Should that not be our one great concern in life? Not our agenda, our comfort, but rather leading people to their savior? If I can put it as clearly as I can, legitimately, how much must we love ourselves and hate others to put our discomfort of being different, our dislike of saying things that are unliked and unpopular before the eternal salvation of others in the face of this hell?

If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian tonight, won't you take this sermon in that spirit that we love you enough to say that you are going to hell if you do not have your trust in Jesus Christ?

[18:46] But we have this opportunity to repent, to believe. And so if you know Jesus can save you, put your trust in him.

Do not put off thinking about this. And if you've trusted in Jesus to save you from hell, won't you go out and lovingly and winsomely and urgently hold him out to others?

I was listening to a podcast this week about the fall of Vietnam to the communists in the 70s. One of the shocking things about it is that when the Americans sent planes to evacuate people out of the capital, people were clambered over and trampled on and torn out of the plane by soldiers so desperate to get out and on that plane that they left others to die on the runway.

Brothers and sisters, do not be those soldiers escaping from hell but leaving others to face their judgment without the good news of the Savior.

Do you not let anyone go unwarned and unprayed for because hell is God's eternal punishment for sinners outside of Christ. So Helen, how do we respond rightly in our hearts to that message?

[20:08] Two applications, one longer than the other. We begin by recognizing it as the punishment that we deserve, each of us. We began thinking a little bit about justice, didn't we?

That is what it comes down to. Justice is getting what we deserve and therefore anything that is not what we deserve is therefore pure grace. But we don't live like that, do we?

Because we confuse what God has given us with what we deserve. We touched this morning on how weak our sense of justice is even at its very strongest. But Jesus tells us just how pure and perfect God's sense of justice is in Matthew 5.

Have you ever noticed in passing what he says, not even our words or our actions but the motives of our hearts deserve? You've heard it was said of those of old, you shall not murder and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council. Whoever says, you fool, will be liable to the hell of

fire?

[21 : 19] What if the king was assassinated, we said? How terrible would that be? But what if we were angry in our hearts towards someone? What about our road rage? What about our words spoken in anger and in haste to one another?

God's perfect justice says that it deserves hell because murder is simply the outworking of that anger in our hearts. Or what about our eyes? What we look at in secret?

You have heard it was said you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better, says Jesus, that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.

Surely if I'm not sleeping with somebody that I'm not married to, surely if it's just lust, if it's just porn, surely that doesn't count.

[22 : 20] God's justice says our lust deserves hell because adultery is the outworking of that root of lust in our hearts. We make the mistake, don't we, in our kind of sin accounting of thinking it's only those big sins that need mercy and need grace and that God isn't bothered by lesser, harmless sins that we commit.

Jesus says no. God demands that every sin beginning in our hearts and working its way out in our lives deserves to be punished in hell.

And so, when we are not punished for our sin, that's not fair. When we are not being punished for our sin, that's not fair.

How would that transform our hearts and our lives to take that in? You know, we live, don't we, as if not being punished is what we deserve, that we should be affirmed in our lifestyle, that we should be supported in our decisions, and when we're not, we think that's not fair.

But to see it God's way, that's like a naughty child being given good things and thinking that it's a reward for being good rather than being good, giving good things out of the grace of the giver towards one who is evil.

[23 : 44] What would it change then to believe that you do not deserve anything but God's everlasting wrath? Well, you would receive, wouldn't you, everything God gives you in this life with thankfulness, and you would receive his words with humility.

Jesus says, God makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, sends rain on the just and the unjust. Even such basic things as sun and rain are undeserved gifts from God, he says.

Every good and every perfect gift comes down from above. In fact, even time itself, today, this time, the Bible says, is a measure of God's patience.

In 2 Peter 3, people are saying, you Christians say, Jesus is coming back. Well, where is he? Well, to that, Peter says, the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promises, some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

See that, the reason that judgment day hasn't come yet is because God is patient. God is patient with sinners in order that we might have time to turn to him, to repent, not to suffer the torment of hell forever.

[25 : 03] That is what God wants, says Peter, for you to use his gifts to turn to him with thankfulness and for forgiveness. And not because we deserve that, but because he is gracious and he is patient with us.

Does that not transform every single day and every single thing in it? If you are not, if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, think every single day that you have lived and not died has been God's patience towards you that you might turn to him and be forgiven.

Think of that today, actually this service, a measure of God's patience to you that you might be forgiven. Either every good thing that you have ever had, food on the table, a roof over your head, friends, family, life itself, the chance to hear of Jesus.

You do not deserve it and none of us do. It's not fair. We do not deserve tomorrow because justice for our sins would be hell presently.

It is not because God is patient and because God has been gracious. And so how should we respond to God's grace? Well, we should turn each day from our sin, we should crucify it, turn to God with thankfulness, ask his forgiveness, and humbly put our trust in Christ.

[26 : 30] In short, that we would repent and believe so that we would be saved. It said earlier that Jesus suffered hell in our place on the cross. And what is so remarkable is that he is the only

person ever to have lived who did not deserve that.

The only one without sins to pay for paid for the sins of others facing hell upon the cross in his death. And the Bible says that he did that so that we might be spared what we deserve, so that we, in fact, might receive what he deserves in place of what we deserve.

Peter says in 1 Peter 2, he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that you might die to sin and live to righteousness. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, for our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

And that righteousness is not something that we can do or live. But when Christ died, the Bible says our sin was counted against him so that he got what we deserve such that his righteousness could be counted to us that we get what he deserves.

And he did that so that hell would only ever be a warning to you and never an experience. So that his words would only ever need to gesture towards the reality such that you would never face the reality yourself.

[28 : 02] He suffered hell in your place to save you from ever going there simply by trusting in his death to free you.

What grace is that? What grace? So what more can I say if you have not to urge you to put your trust in him?

Jesus came not only to warn you but to take the punishment from you and save you from it. And so trust him to save you from this hell and you will be saved.

That is God's promise. A right view of hell should lead us to throw ourselves on God's grace held out to us in Jesus. And it should then lead us to a new way of life very briefly and finally.

What kind of people then should we be? Well, we've thought about our gratitude, haven't we? The thankfulness with which we live our lives that are completely undeserved.

[29 : 03] But Peter asks and answers the question like this in 2 Peter 3. He says, But the day of the Lord will come like a thief and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?

As Christians, we should never live God's way because we fear going to hell if we don't. If we have taken Jesus' sacrifice to heart, then hell is closed to us.

We do not need to fear going there. But no, Peter is saying if Jesus is coming to judge the living and the dead and this world will pass away and you know that you will be saved on that day when he comes, then surely you're not still living for the here and now, are you?

Surely, if you know how the story ends, you are working towards that end. Surely, he says, you're living lives of holiness and godliness in anticipation of the age to come.

[30 : 16] Surely, we are not wasting our lives, are we? Surely, we are not squandering our time on sinful desires and passions. Surely, if we know what is coming, we are living lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening that day, he says.

I don't think that means bringing it any nearer, but it certainly doesn't mean putting it off, putting it off, putting it off, does it? Brothers and sisters, if God has saved you from hell, do you not live each day overflowing with thankfulness to him?

Do you not live each day clinging to the savior who has saved you? Do you not live each day begging him to save others from that punishment, holding him out to those who are at present headed for that destination?

Are we not living for the coming of Christ in glory to judge the living and the dead? God has set a judgment day and appointed the judge by raising him from the dead and so he calls us to fix our eyes upon him and live for him every day that he gives us by his grace and in his patience here and now.

That is the people we should be, those whom God has saved from the punishment we deserve by the death of his own son. Let's pray together that we would be those people.

[31 : 47] Let's pray. God, our Father, we have considered this evening realities that make us tremble.

Lord, we pray that our hearts would be soft enough even to tremble. Lord, forgive us, we ask, when our hearts are cold and hardened to the spiritual realities that you reveal.

Lord, help us, we pray, to see our sin as you see it, to have a right understanding of its gravity and its depth, its severity and seriousness such that hell would be deserved by us.

O Lord, lead us to Jesus Christ, we pray, even now, Lord, from our sin into the arms of the Savior, how we thank you and we praise you, Lord, for what you suffered in our place.

O Lord, our minds and our hearts cannot comprehend, we cannot comprehend what it was that you suffered on the cross, but we thank you that you did suffer on the cross, that we would never truly know what it was.

[33 : 09] That you have spared us that suffering. We praise you, we thank you, and we pray by your Spirit you would enable us to live for you each day, to thank you, to praise you, Lord, as we go from here and to hold out the good news, Lord, to a dying and a lost world.

Father, help us, we pray, not to be indifferent, Lord, to the destiny of those around us, but Lord, that it would weigh on us, not because we are destined for there, but because others are and we know the Savior.

Lord, help us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.