

Week 5: WHAT TO DO WITH HELL?

Opening Question:

- What have you heard about hell from sermons, if anything?
- What are some depictions of hell that you are familiar with (e.g. art, pop culture, etc.?)
- What questions come up in your mind when you think about hell?

We will engage the topic of hell by asking a few questions:

1. Is hell real?
2. Why is there a hell? Who goes there?
3. What is all this about predestination?

Oftentimes, we think of hell like this: God gives humans time to choose God, but if they do not, then he casts them into hell; and even if those people beg for mercy, God says, “Nope! You had your chance!” Thankfully, that is not the biblical depiction of hell or of how God relates to people.¹

Every human has a sinful, fallen nature. No one is free from sin, and we cannot freely turn back to God on our own. We are all deserving of death, of hell, eternal separation from God. If we were left to ourselves, we would never choose God—we would not *know* to choose God, because we are so mired in self and sin. It is only by the work of the Holy Spirit that we are drawn to God in Jesus Christ where we find salvation and restoration of our relationship to God. God makes the first move and chooses and saves people.² God chooses people *so that* they may tell others about God and God’s grace.

The Bible teaches us that in the presence of God is where we as human beings belong—where we thrive, where we flourish. To be removed from God’s presence, to be absent from God for eternity—that is hell. God elects (meaning God chooses) to save those who will be in his kingdom. God gives human beings the ability to respond yes to God’s saving work in Jesus Christ by living a life of obedience to Christ.

¹ Timothy Keller, *Reason for God*, 79.

² John 15:14-16

1. Is hell real?

Yes. You probably know someone who does not know God or who has not claimed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. This might cause anxiety, worry, and fear for you if you are a Christian. That is legitimate. Our temptation then is to deny that hell exists, because we are worried about our loved ones who are not yet in Christ,³ but that would be to disregard pointed biblical statements about hell, and it would be deceiving ourselves—which doesn't help us or our loved ones.

Jesus talks about hell in his parables, and he says in no uncertain terms there is a separation between those who are in the kingdom of God and those who are outside of it—who persist in sin.

In the Parable of the Weeds,⁴ Jesus tells a story about wheat and weeds growing up together in a farmer's field. At the harvest, the farmer's servants collect the weeds to be burned, and bring the wheat to the barn. Later in explaining the parable to his disciples, Jesus tells them that the one sowing the seed is the Son of Man (himself), the field is the world, the good seed are the people of the kingdom, the bad seed are the people of the evil one, the enemy who sows them is the evil one, the harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

There is a hell, and those who go there are those who persist in sin.⁵ Jesus tells this parable to warn his listeners against being among those who persist in sin, who would be separated from the kingdom of God.

2. Why is there a hell? Who goes there?

There is a hell because sin has consequences.⁶

³ Sermon on hell by Pastor Mary, March 10, 2013: <https://livestream.com/calvin-college/events/1841797/videos/13549661>.

⁴ Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

⁵ In 3 more parables in Matthew 25 (parable of the Ten Virgins, Parable of the Talents, Parable of the Sheep and Goats), Jesus reiterates how those who serve the Son of Man, who are ready for him, who belong to him will go to eternal life; and those who have persisted in sin will be sent out of his presence to "eternal punishment" (Matt. 25:46).

⁶ ref. Pastor Mary's sermon; and Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 11, <http://www.heidelberg-catechism.com/en/lords-days/4.html>.

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All of the Bible bears witness to the fact and reality that sin has consequences. Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden and from the presence of God because they sinned. The generation of Israelites whom Moses leads out of slavery in Egypt, dies in the wilderness before seeing the promised land because they sinned. David rapes Bathsheba, commits adultery, and kills her husband, and the baby conceived in her by that act dies because sin has consequences. Jesus suffers and dies a brutal death in place of us because sin has consequences. By our sin, we would rightly be eternally separated from God because sin has consequences.

Sin is deadly serious. It is the very thing that separates us human beings from our creator, from one another, from creation, and we are even estranged from ourselves. God takes sin *seriously* because it threatens the life and flourishing of his beloved creation, including us. God is a God of love and mercy, *and* God is a God of justice. How can God be loving if God is fine with sin, the very thing that destroys us? That would be like a parent of a child who is addicted being like, “Meh, go on ahead with that stuff...might kill ya...but, whatever.” Because sin is so serious and separates us from God, Jesus is clear in communicating to his disciples that if you persist in sin, you will end up in a place removed from the presence of God, removed from the kingdom of God—and you don’t want to end up there. Jesus is saying, “I don’t want you there!” Hell is an eternity of separation from God. Jesus died so we could be saved from that; and even more, so we could be reunited with God.

3. What is all this about predestination?

Within the doctrine (teaching) of salvation, there is a doctrine of predestination. Predestination often gets associated with Calvinism, for better or worse. Augustine (4-5th cent.) and Martin Luther are among the theologians who also taught predestination based on Scripture, so it was not just Calvin.

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Predestination is concerning the salvation of the elect, those whom God willed to save since before creation.⁷ Predestination is not about God determining whom you will marry or what you will eat for breakfast tomorrow—it is about salvation.

The doctrine of predestination teaches that all human beings, because of our fallen, sinful nature, are deserving of death and eternal separation from God. But, by God's unfathomable grace and mercy, God chooses to save the elect through Jesus Christ.

It is not that people are good and God, a big meanie, only chooses to save some people and not others. *All* people are fallen and sinful, and God in God's gracious mercy wills to save those whom God will. And those who are in Christ, empowered and being formed by the Holy Spirit of God, are free to respond 'yes' to God.

It is beyond our knowing who is among God's people and those in the kingdom, and who is outside of it, and frankly, that is not our concern as human beings. We will make ourselves crazy trying to figure that out because it is not for us to know. When you are called to the kingdom and called to know Christ as Lord and Savior and claim him, *your* discipleship is to follow after him all your days, and invite others to follow him, too.

Here is a helpful image by Richard Mouw: Imagine "[painted] above the door of salvation the words 'Whosoever will may come.' I hope, though, once a repentant sinner walks through that door, he will look up and see that the Lord has written on the other side, 'You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.'"⁸ God elects. We respond in faith.

This is another aspect where the mystery of faith is—we do not know how or why God saves as God does; we do not know who is in or out—and those things are not ours to worry about. We simply respond in faith when God draws us to Jesus by the work of the Spirit.

The thing about hell is there is an alternative, a glorious alternative: God's presence, the kingdom of God, the new creation, and knowing Jesus. God's deep desire is that we are

⁷ Romans 8:28-30

To read more from John Calvin on predestination, read *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, chapter 21.

⁸ Richard Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*, 47.

restored in relationship to him through Jesus Christ.⁹ Jesus came that we would have life abundantly.¹⁰

Hell is not the centerpiece of the story. Jesus is. Jesus who conquered sin and death; Jesus who will return to the earth and rule over creation, and the new heavens and earth.¹¹ Jesus invites you to follow after him, to turn away from the paths that lead to death and hell, and to turn toward the path of life, to turn to him.

Closing Prayer for friends who do not yet believe:

Gracious God,

Thank you for Jesus. Thank you for his redemption of us. We bring before you our loved one who do not yet know him, do not yet know you. Shine the light of your Spirit upon their hearts that they would come to a saving knowledge of Jesus who forgives sins, gives life, and calls us to follow after him. Lord, we trust that you know them inside and out, and that you love them better than even we do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Questions:

1. Things that made sense? Things you are still having trouble with?
2. What does Christ's resurrection mean to you in light of hell?

⁹ 1 Peter 3:9

¹⁰ John 10:10, 14-16

¹¹ Revelation 21

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Resources Used:

John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, chapter 21.

Richard Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*, Zondervan, 2004.

Sermon by Pastor Mary, on hell: <https://livestream.com/calvin-college/events/1841797/videos/13549661>.

Timothy Keller, *Reason for God*, Penguin Group, 2008.