

The Bible and the Afterlife

The Inferno – A Biblical Study of Hell

Matthew 22:1-14

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Introduction

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Words used to describe Hell in the Bible:

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Conclusion: Experience and an Invitation

Study Guide

This week's study guide will focus on the Bible's teaching regarding hell.

Monday, April 23 – The Old Testament speaks of the realm of the dead as Sheol, the Pit, the Depths or the Grave. Most of the references to these terms mean simply “death” but on occasion they point toward retribution or punishment for wickedness after death. Let's look at a few of these today. These verses address people who turned from God and did what was evil in God's sight. **Read Ezekiel 26:19-21 and Ezekiel 33:10-11.** What does this last passage tell us about God's heart regarding the punishment of the wicked? In the following passage, we read of God's desire to keep people from the Pit. In these verses we hear a foreshadowing of Jesus' words that he would give his life as a “ransom for many.” Read Job 33:15-30. What do these verses teach us about God's salvation and will for humanity?

Tuesday, April 24 – Let's turn to Jesus' words today about hell in the Sermon on the Mount. **Read Matthew 5:17-30.** What role does hell play in these passages? How does Jesus describe hell? What is God's Word to you from these passages? Read Luke 16:19-31 in which Jesus tells a parable about the afterlife. What was Jesus' point in telling this parable?

Wednesday, April 25 – We turn to two of Jesus' parables of judgment today. **Read Matthew 24:36-51.** What is the point Jesus wants us to understand from this passage? What do you picture when you think of “weeping and gnashing of teeth”? Are you ready; should the Master of the House return today? **Read Matthew 22:1-14.** Look over your sermon notes from this last weekend. What do we learn about God's heart, and about those who choose hell, from this passage? What is the meaning of the improperly clothed individual who came to the wedding? What does the parable tell us about hell?

Thursday, April 26 – Today we'll turn to the writings of the apostles regarding hell. **Read Romans 2:1-11.** How does Paul describe hell and, according to Paul, who goes there? **Read II Peter 2:1-22.** What does Peter teach about hell in verse 4 and verse 17? Who is hell reserved for? How are we saved from it?

Friday, April 27 – Today we'll conclude our study of hell by turning to the Book of Revelation. Revelation paints pictures with words of the judgment of God and the final victory of the Lord over all that is evil. **Read Revelation 1:17-18** – what does it mean that Jesus holds the keys of hell and death? **Read Revelation 9:1-11 and Revelation 20:7-15.** What does this passage teach us about hell?

The aim of the Bible's teaching about hell is to warn people, and to encourage them to walk with God, living in the grace of God, and to accept God's invitation to the wedding banquet. Whether hell is eternal death, or eternal punishment, or simply living for eternity in the darkness outside the kingdom of God, it is a place none need go, nor one that God wishes any to go. We'll consider this in more detail this weekend in our sermon on the Last Judgment.

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SLIDE 1 The Bible and the Afterlife.

As you're seated I invite you to take out of your bulletin your sermon notes and your study guide. The sermon notes are an outline of today's message and I would like to encourage you to follow along and write down the things that you would like to be able to reflect on, and maybe even discuss with a friend or family member later on. On the backside is a study guide. This is an opportunity for you to read the Bible on your own and reflect upon its meaning. The passages you have before you focus on the topic of Hell and punishment as we find it in the Bible.

This past week I read a book that I wouldn't necessarily recommend but I was curious about it. When you buy books on Amazon.com they often recommend other books to you. I purchased the ***90 minutes in Heaven***

book of by Don Piper and Amazon also recommended this book entitled **23 Minutes in Hell**. The author claims to have visited Hell and returned to warn us about what it is like. Whether you question his experience as being authentic or not, the book is very frightening. There is a sense of fear and dread that you were supposed to have when you think about hell.

We are going to talk about a difficult topic today. Some have said is just a hot topic, but it is more than just a hot topic. It is a difficult topic and there are not many preachers who wake up on Monday morning and say, "Gosh I can't wait to preach about hell this coming weekend." I do know a few preachers they get excited about that, but most of us don't get excited about preaching about hell. Mostly it makes us a bit nervous. I have preached by my estimate around 450 sermons and this will only be the second one that is focused on the topic of Hell. I have talked about hell on many occasions but only preached on it now as a full sermon two times. It is just not a topic that we pastors get excited about preaching on. But it is something that we need to understand.

Since we are in the midst of a sermon series on the Bible and the afterlife it seems like we must talk about this topic. If we are going to talk about heaven, which we will in three weeks on Mother's Day, and if we are going to talk about the last judgment which we want to talk about next week, and if we're going to talk about resurrection or reincarnation as we did last week, and we have to talk somewhere along the way about hell. We have to understand what the Bible actually teaches about this.

So today we're going to try and understand what the Bible teaches us about hell, and then look at the troubling questions that we have about hell. We will look at how we might answer those questions.

Finally, we will look in a little more detail at the Scripture passage we have for today and then look at some persons who have experienced hell, or so they believe.

Let's begin by recognizing that lots of folks have different ideas about hell. If I surveyed you each one of you might have a slightly different understanding of Hell. We went to downtown Durango last week and spent some time on the corner of College and Main asking people about the afterlife. We to stop people on the street and one of the questions that we asked was, "What do you think hell is like?" This is what they said.

VIDEO "What is Hell Like?"

SLIDE 1 Repeat

Most of us probably feel like that person on the video. We have never been to hell and we hope to never find out what it is really like. That is a picture we have of it.

I have read most of the passages of Scripture this past week that have to do with hell, or what might be understood to be held. There are around 100 passages of Scripture that specifically deal with punishment in the afterlife. There are many more than that that mentioned the dead or the place of the dead. Having read most of those I can tell you that the Bible does not paint a comprehensive picture of Hell.

Any language we use to talk about the afterlife, even we talk about heaven, is only metaphorical language. We cannot conceive on this side of eternity something that is wholly different from this. So the Scripture writers have to use ideas that we are familiar with to try to communicate something that is otherworldly. When the Scripture writers talk about streets of gold, we know that heaven is probably not paved with gold. But instead they are trying to paint a picture of splendor and glory. The images of pearly gates are probably not meant to be literal. Those images are used to try and help us understand something that is almost incomprehensible on this side of eternity.

The same is true when it comes to hell. Any words that we try to use are only pointing towards some greater reality. They all will fall short of what the reality is. Let's keep that in mind as we study the Scriptures.

I want to begin by recognizing the words that are used to describe hell and the Bible. In the Old Testament there are several words that are used. The words that are used are also synonymous with the words that are used to describe death. Sometimes these words will mean the place of the dead, sometimes they will mean death, and sometimes they will signify a place within the place of the dead where people are punished. The most frequently used word in the Bible is Sheol.

SLIDE Flames with “Sheol” = The Place of the Dead.

Sheol is the place where all of the dead go according to the Hebrew Bible. It is typically understood to be down. Over time the Jewish people or the Israelites came to understand that there might be more than one compartment to Sheol. They began to think that there was one section of

Sheol that was reserved for the righteous. There was another section of Sheol that was reserved for those who are wicked.

Since Sheol was down, one understood that the upper levels were reserved for those who are righteous and while the deepest depths of Sheol is where those who are being punished would go. We find in the book of Deuteronomy a picture of Sheol and God's anger and wrath burning like fire in the depths of Sheol. This imagery about burning begins to develop here along with an idea of God's anger or wrath. That was reserved for not only those who rebelled against God but they have blood on their hands because they had done what was evil.

One of the questions that many of you asked today I am sure is this.

SLIDE “Who Goes to Hell?”

Let me tell you today that you will be disappointed by this sermon because we are not going to tell you that today. We are going to answer that question next week we talk about the last judgment. Next week we'll talk about who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. Today we will only describe it in some measure.

So the lowered sections of Sheol would be considered a place like hell while the upper sections were actually seemed to be a place like paradise. So when the thief on the cross says to Jesus, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom," Jesus then turns to the thief and says, "Today you will be with me in paradise," he is referring to a place in Sheol whether righteous go.

Many of you learned the apostle's Creed when you were younger. In that Creed we say.

SLIDE “Jesus was crucified, dead and buried, and he descended into hell.”

It is important to remember that the word hell in this Creed actually is the Greek word, "Hades." This was the equivalent of the Hebrew word is Sheol. It was the place of the dead.

So when we wonder if Jesus really went to hell, what the Creed is really saying is that he went to the place of the dead. There is a tradition based loosely on to Scriptures that when Jesus died on the cross he first went to the place of the dead and it was there that he proclaim the Gospel

to the righteous with live before that they might be set free from this place and enter the kingdom of heaven.

There are several other words in the Old Testament that are used to describe Sheol or hell.

SLIDE “the Pit”, “the Depths”, “the Grave.”

All of these are words that were sometimes used to describe the place of the dead or the place for some were punished.

When we come to the New Testament the word that is used is Hades.

SLIDE “Hades”

Remember that the New Testament was written in Greek and this is a Greek term. This is literally the New Testament word for Sheol. It was meant to describe the place of the dead just as it did in Greco Roman mythology. Remember that Hades was the god of the underworld and became the name that was used for the entire underworld. People throughout the ancient near East and in deed the entire Roman empire believed in a place called Hades which is where the dead went.

Within Hades there was a place for those who were good and a place for those who are wicked. Later on, Christianity came to view the Hades as primarily hell. They made it synonymous with hell and so it was linked with judgment but originally Hades was similar to Sheol and that it was a place where the dead went and in there was a compartment that was reserved for those who are evil.

We see this even in New Testament where Hades is seen as simply the grave. In 1 Corinthians 15:54-55 Paul says,

SLIDE 2 “*Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?*”

The word death there in Greek is Hades. Hades is simply used sometimes to mean the grave or death. Sometimes it is used synonymous with hell.

In addition to Hades, there are several other words that are used in the New Testament. One of them is, “Gehenna.” This refers to the Valley of Hinnom. This is an actual place that was just outside the walls of Jerusalem. Here is what it looks like today.

SLIDE 3 Gehenna

In the ancient times of Israel, pagans would go to this place and sacrifice their infants to the god “Molok.” Later on, when people repented of this practice, the place came to hold such a connotation of evil and evil things that were done there that it became the trash heap for the city of Jerusalem. All the refuse was taken here. In the day of Jesus it was burned continuously and this is where dead animals and also dead bodies were taken who were not claimed by family.

This place then became all word picture for painting what hell would be like. It is a place where fires are constantly burning, where trash is sent, and a place of great stench. Again the Bible is trying to paint a picture for you of an awful place that you do not want to go.

In Matthew chapter 8 Jesus goes on to describe what hell might be like. He does not call it hell but he simply describes a place of punishment. In verse 12 he says this is a place of,

SLIDE 4 “...outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

In Matthew 13:42 he describes this as,

SLIDE 5 “...the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

It is interesting once again to note that the Bible is not trying to paint a literal picture for you. If it is outer darkness there probably are no flames there. If it is a furnace of fire there is probably no darkness. Both of these are images or metaphors that are trying to help you imagine an awful place.

Just last month our family went to Colorado Springs where I had a board of ordained Ministry meeting. We went to the Cave of the Winds. You can go deep into the caves and the guide and then tells you that there is zero light in his place. If you were to stay down there in the darkness with no light for a period of time you would go blind to. When some of the first explorers to enter the cave went in they only had torches. The wind would come through and blow out the flames. The tour guide would then tell you that this is how it felt, and they would turn off the lights.

You put your hand in front of your face and you can't see it. That is how dark it is. No matter how hard you try and focus your eyes you can't see it. We're standing there in the kids get a bit fidgety and even the adults get creeped out. Utter darkness is no fun.

The idea of outer darkness is supposed to be frightening to you. You are to understand that this is a place that you don't want to go. It would be terrifying to be in this place.

The idea of a fiery furnace is a metaphor that is reinforced in the book of Revelation when it talks about how being a lake of fire. When I was a kid and my mom let me stay home from school by myself for the first time he cuts I was sick I wanted to make myself some soup. The way my mom made soup is that she would turn on the electric burners of the stove and then I would watch her tap the burner to see it was hot. So I turned the stove on and I put my hand down... and I left it there...oops!

I screamed and I called my mom at the school where she was a teacher. And I screamed to the secretary. Within just a few minutes there were three fire trucks, an ambulance, and two police cars in front of our house. Now it was painful to get burned, but he was even more painful when they stuck my hand in the bucket of ice with the shape of the electric burner seared into my skin.

You are to imagine being burned perennially. There is no stopping of that burning. That is supposed to terrify you and believe me it terrifies me.

There are other images used for hell. In 2 Peter 2:4 we find another Greek mythological term used, "Tartarus." This is translated as a place of deepest darkness. The New International Version of the Bible translates it as the doom dungeon. This is a place that one does not want to go.

The very last line of the book of Isaiah in chapter 66 where God talks about creating a new heaven and a new earth is a warning for those who will not accept that promise.

SLIDE 6 "For the worms that devour them will never die, and the fire that burns them will never go out. All who pass by will view them with utter horror."

Jesus even picks up this image in the gospel of Mark. What is he talking about? He is talking about maggots who are consuming or feasting upon flesh and they never die. That is a very graphic and grotesque image.

I almost thought about preaching a sermon in one minute. What would happen if I just gave them a 60 second sermon? I decided I just couldn't do it, but I thought about it.

If I did, what I was going to say is, "Here is what the Bible teaches about hell. It is terrible and terrifying place and you don't want to go there." That is it. That pretty much summarizes what the Bible teaches about hell.

As much as we in the modern era would like to dismiss the idea of hell, we really cannot as people of faith. Jesus talks about hell as a very real place. The disciples talk about hell. It is not a dominant theme in the New Testament but we do have to take it seriously.

Not only do I believe we cannot easily dismiss it, but I believe it is absolutely essential for the nature and character of God and the nature and character of human existence. I will explain to you why I believe this in just a moment.

While I have only summarized what the Bible teaches about hell, Christians throughout the ages have tried to help people understand how terrifying it would be to go there so they would know never to choose that path.

You do understand that the role of punishment is not to hurt you but to help you understand not to go a certain direction. We build prisons with the hope that they will be empty. Don't we hope that the prison itself stands there as a reminder to people that you never want to go to that place? Punishment is a way of trying to move people not to participate in certain things.

Throughout the ages people have tried to paint graphic pictures of what hell might be like. Perhaps the most graphic came from Dante who wrote in the early 1300's. He described in poetry three places that he visited during a three-day journey into the round of the dead. He spent the first portion of that time and a place that he called "the inferno" or hell. He spoke in graphic imagery of what that looked like.

Then he moved to a place called Purgatory and finally on to paradise. That image from the 1300's sticks with us today even if you never read the book, ***The Divine Comedy***. I can't even share with you here in the sanctuary some of the imagery because it would give some of you terrifying nightmares just from the things he describes. Certainly would not be appropriate for small children, but that was the goal! The goal is that you would hear these things and say, "I would never, ever, ever want to go there."

One of the things you can talk about is that Dante envisioned hell as a cone shape. It got smaller towards the bottom and it was under the earth. The upper levels are simply reserved for those who are not baptized, a place which he called limbo. Then he went down to the lower depths of hell and each level gets progressively worse. Once again this is not in the Bible but is simply Dante's interpretation of hell. The farther you go down in hell the more progressively worse the sinners are that you meet.

In one place there is a river of hot black tar and people are covered up to their necks in it. New to deepest regions of how people become turned into gnarly trees and their bodies are stretched apart while they are still conscious. Satan resides in the very depths of hell and it is very dark and cold as ice. The people there are frozen in chunks of ice yet they are still alive and conscious. They can see and they are aware of their existence but they are frozen in ice.

His images are meant to make you shake in trouble. Dante said that as you enter there is a sign over the door way to hell that simply says.

SLIDE Flames with, “Abandon every hope all of you who enter here.”

Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* is a painting we try to put on your bulletin cover but we could not capture the detail. It captures both the idea of the inferno as well as Purgatory as well as a place of paradise. Michelangelo, painting in the 1500s, is trying to paint this same idea of what hell would be like. It took him from 1535 to 1541 to paint this.

SLIDE 7 Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*

SLIDE 8 Close up of a lost soul being dropped into hell.

As you look at the bottom you begin to see that his imagery is taken in large part from contemporary literature and Dante's Inferno more than from the Bible. In the lower left-hand side you can see pictures of the demons pulling down people into the realm of hell.

SLIDE 9 Close up of the lower left side

SLIDE 10 Demon dragging someone down.

These folks are terrified and this close-up is one of the demon dragging someone down into hell.

SLIDE 11 Boat with souls.

In the lower center of the picture you find the River Styx. The mythological figure Charon is ferrying the boat across the river. This is not from the Bible but from Greek mythology. You might remember that the Greeks buried their dead with the cooling under their tongue because that was the price to pay the ferryman to take you across the river. Here these folks are in the boat and if you look carefully at their faces they are terrified. This is not at all what they expected when they arrived here.

What troubles me the most as I look at this fresco is this image you find in the lower right-hand corner.

SLIDE 12 Man with hand over face.

The look on this man's face says to me, "I never believed this was true." It's almost as if he is saying, "Why did I make all of those excuses?" It is like he finally realizes the severity of the way that he lived his life.

This picture you are supposed to look at and say, "I pray oh God that will not be me."

I think it was the intention of Michelangelo that when the Pope and the leaders of the church looked at this painting, and when anyone came to worship in this place at the Pope's Chapel, they would be terrified by this and long to be at the place at the top of the painting when there is paradise.

SLIDE 13 Top of painting.

The first pope to gaze upon this fresco was Pope Paul III. He fell on his knees when he saw this and cried out, "**Lord, and charge me not with my sins when thou shalt come on the day of judgment.**"

The Bible talks about judgment. It talks about punishment. It talks about hell. We can't just dismiss that.

We recognize that much of what we know about hell comes from popular literature and art work through the ages and not necessarily from the Bible.

Hell does raise certain troubling questions for us. I think this is why we hesitate to preach about as pastors. I think this is why there is something inside many of us to just find this troubling. Some folks are disturbed by hell at all, but some of us find this a troubling concept. There are several things I would like to talk about the trouble us when it comes to hell.

First, I think we find the idea troubling that God is eternally tormenting as in hell. Our hope is that none of you are one to be fair, but for those who go to hell we struggle with the idea that God is eternally tormenting them. This is a disturbing thought for two reasons.

SLIDE Flames with, “Is God tormenting people eternally?”

First I think we struggle with the idea of eternal punishment. We think to ourselves, "Does the punishment fit the crime?" Is it really right that eternal suffering should happen for 80 or 100 years of sin? Presumably most people don't sin their entire lives. They have a mixture of good and bad. Or should someone be eternally punished for rejecting God or the gospel?

For many thoughtful people this is a disturbing concept—that in God's justice, the failure to respond to God's grace and mercy in this life would result in FOREVER punishment. So theologians and pastors have wrestled with the idea of eternal punishment.

The way that most theologians and pastors have come to grips with this is the understanding that the eternal punishment is really eternal separation from God or eternal death. That doesn't preclude the idea that right after death there is some punishment, or some awareness of seeing God and being aware of what we could have had.

Some people read Scripture and believe that your soul is immortal. The idea is that your soul does not die so if you do not go to be with God in heaven than your soul has to go somewhere and you will be consigned forever to another place.

Some people believe that that immortality is a gift from God. It is not a right that your soul would live forever but it is a gift. If it is a gift, then it is possible that if you reject the gift you would not live forever with God. There would be some awareness of what you've done and that you have rejected God, and then your life would simply end and that would be it. You would be extinguished.

This makes sense when you read what you find in Romans or Paul says that, "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." If the wages of sin is death that seems to indicate that sin results in death and not eternal suffering—but eternal separation from God. In 2Thessalonians 1:9 we find a similar passage which says...

SLIDE 14 “They will be punished with eternal destruction, forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power.”

Destruction there would signify death and that there would be an everlasting death. In the book of Revelation the lake of fire is described as a second death. So there is this idea of a first death and then a second death which would be the idea of annihilation.

That helps me somewhat in thinking that there is a limited amount of time that someone would suffer in a place like hell. The idea is that they might have been good people but they simply rejected God and they didn't respond to God's grace so they don't spend all of eternity suffering, but rather they made a decision they don't want to be with God forever.

In some ways this is a logical explanation. If you are an atheist you basically have defined reality by saying there is no God so why would you want to spend eternity with God if you don't even believe he exists? I don't think God is the force an atheist to be with him forever.

This brings some sense of justice to the idea of hell. But there is a second idea that I find disturbing and that is that God is tormenting people in hell. I find it disturbing that God would be a tormentor.

We have names for people who torment other people. We call them monsters. I will tell you that God is no monster. God does not torture or torment anyone. So how do we understand hell then? I think we have to understand hell in much different terms and I think this is very important.

I understand that the Bible paints pictures for us of what heaven is like. We will talk more about this in two weeks to let me just give you a taste of that. If heaven is a place where God is and we are in the immediate presence of God, then Hell would be the opposite of that. Hell would be the place where we have chosen not to be in the presence of God and instead do we have left the presence of God.

The Scripture tells us there is no where God that is not present, but hell would be that place which is the opposite of heaven where one would choose to not experience the presence of God.

There are many things that come with the presence of God that I think would this. The Bible tells us that in heaven there is no need for Sun or moon or stars because God's light will illuminate you. If you are in a place where you can not experience the presence of God and then it would be a

place of utter darkness—such darkness that it would make you tremble if you were to really understand it.

Scripture tells us that in heaven there will be no more suffering and no more sorrow and no more weeping and no more pain. If that is the case in heaven because God has fully and completely healed us and taken away all that is bitter and hurtful in our lives, then if hell is the opposite it would be a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. It would be a place where any hope of healing would disappear. It would be a place where we are stuck in our sorrows and the pain of life forever.

If heaven is a place for we are wholly sanctified and got completely transforms us so we are filled with utter love for God and those around us, then how would be a place for sanctification never happens. In that place all the souls that were there would only be consumed with themselves. They would be focused on themselves all the time because it would all be about me. You would find no one there who would love you unconditionally.

Hell is that place where all the good things that come from God are absent. When I look at it this way I imagine that the worst experiences that we have on this earth are foretaste of what hell looks like. This is a place that you would not want to go.

It is place where you long to be loved and no one can love you. It is a place for you long to be in light but you are in utter darkness. It is a place where inside there is a sense of no joy and no hope and utter despair. That would be the opposite of being in the presence of God.

Who would want to choose that?

I think it is important to acknowledge that some people feel like hell exists here on earth. You heard that on the video from one person. Some of you have even said to me, "I really don't believe in the afterlife but I think people get their hell here on earth."

The idea is that when you do wrong and you turn away from God and God's path you experience hell here on earth. Yes and no.

Sometimes when we walk away from God's path we experience a hell here on earth, but not all the time. There are times when the people who are righteous experience a hell here on earth. The Scriptures promise us that all of that God will use to prepare us for eternity. It is not that God

brings those painful moments but that God will use those to help us become more like him and God will sustain us through those things.

But there are other times where you think that people should experience hell here on earth because of their actions and they actually get to prosper. Psalm 73 asks, "Why do the wicked prosper?" We have all asked this question. Why are there people who do terrible things and they are never caught or face justice? What do we make of murderers who were never captured or never caught? What do we make of people like Hitler who ordered the slaughter of millions? What about the young man who killed 32 people on a college campus this past week? Is it sufficient that the end of their lives they just get to take their own lives and that is it?

We recognize that there is an imbalance to justice in this life. This points me to why I believe that hell is a necessary part of our existence and God's creation.

SLIDE 15 What is the purpose of hell?

Justice is not completely fulfilled here on this earth. There are times and places where people do awful things to folks that not even the death penalty adequately answers the need for justice.

We also must recognize that as God is truly given us free will and a choice that we must be able to choose not to go to heaven. Hell is a necessary part of existence so that we might have a choice. As I said earlier, I don't think God will force any atheist or nonbeliever to go to heaven. God gives us a choice. "Do you wish to follow my path and to live where there is light? Or do you want to walk into darkness?"

The scriptures laid this out over and over again.

SLIDE 16 Choose you this day if we will serve—as for me and my house will serve the Lord.

SLIDE 17 See I set before you life and death, curses and blessings. Choose life.

This is what both Moses and Joshua said to the people. Throughout the Bible we find God giving us choices. He gave Adam and Eve a choice to eat the apple or to restrain themselves. God gives them a choice.

All of this leads me back to the Scripture passage we have before us in Matthew chapter 22. Jesus offers three parables in a row in chapters 21 and 22 of Matthew's Gospel and they are all parables of judgment.

Remember that a parable is usually an allegory which means that the elements stand for something else, so you can't push the parable too far. If you push it too far you find that it begins to break down. You are supposed to get the big picture from the parable.

In this parable there is a King who is having a wedding banquet for his son. You're supposed to recognize immediately that the King is God, the son is Jesus and you are to remember that the church is called the bride of Christ in the Scriptures. So there is a wedding banquet in which we as the church are being united with Christ and everyone is invited to come. The King has sent out invitations to this banquet. I like this parable so far because it says that heaven is going to be like a party. I like parties a lot and I like this imagery of heaven as a party.

So the King sends out invitations to this party but nobody RSVPs. Can you imagine that? The King has invited his subjects to come to this wedding banquet and no one responds. His feelings are kind of hurt because no one said "yes" but then he just figures they all forgot.

The King then sends his servants out to them and they go knocking on the doors of the people in the kingdom and they say, "The King has a meal ready and it's good to be a great day and a great party. It's time right now so come to the party!"

In Luke's Gospel, chapter 14, we read that one by one all of the people gave excuses. Here are all the excuses they give beginning in verse 18. The first said, "I have bought a piece of land and I must go out to see it." Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen and I'm going to go try them out. Please accept my regrets." Another said, "I have just been married and therefore I cannot come."

Do you hear this? I just bought a brand-new SUV and I got to go check out a four-wheel-drive trail on it. I am looking at open houses in the open houses are all on Sunday so I'm sorry I simply can't come. You could probably come up with your own excuse, but the idea is that everyone comes up with an excuse for not going to banquet.

Notice that the King is not sending anyone to hell, they are all just making their own excuses about why they are choosing to not go to heaven. I am not interested. I don't really care about this. It's not my deal.

Servants come back to the King and say, "We are sorry sir, but everyone had excuses as to why they couldn't come to the wedding

banquet." The King says to his servants, "Let's try this just one more time. Go out and let them know that we have the finest food here." Now I like this part of the parable to because I like to eat in a King says there's going to be good food. So I like the idea of there being good food in heaven. The King continues and says, "Go tell them that we have Serious Texas barbecue, all the steak and lobster you can eat, and the most amazing salad bar you have ever seen. Just tell them that the food is hot and it's ready and we are waiting for them."

Do you sense how this parable is working? And do you sense the hearts of the King? Some of us struggle with this idea of hell and how a good and loving God can send people to hell. But what this parable is teaching us is that God does not send anyone to hell. We choose we want to do in our lives, and as a result what we will experience in the next life. We choose to spurn his love and his invitation. I mean a King is sending out his invitation over and over and over again. "You are welcome. This is what eternity looks like."

The King is warning us with the pictures of hell that have been painted in Scripture. He says, "This is what happens when you walk away from my path. Here is the kingdom of light and you are all welcome here. Please choose life with me."

"But if you choose not to walk in that path then this is the natural consequence of that. You will end up in a place where my light is not seen, where there is not hope or joy or love. You will end up in a place of outer darkness. Please don't go there. Come! The feast is spread out before you!"

And yet over and over again in our lives we say, "You know, I am just too busy for that. I am not really interested in it."

What happens last time that really gets the King mad is that they start to make light of the King. Before we were believers we make light of the King as well. We made fun of people who were his followers. We said derogatory things about him because we dismissed him as a myth.

But then they beat up his servants and they killed some of them. You understand that Matthew is writing his gospel just before the Christians are going to start being put to death for their faith. They are persecuted in 65 A.D. and Peter is crucified upside down while Paul is beheaded. We find that by 90 A.D. Christians are being put to death in several parts of the

Roman Empire. The servants who are being sent to invite people to banquet are being put to death and now they King is angry, and that is one judgment comes.

Notice that after the judgment comes the King says to his servants, "Now go out and find some other people to invite. Bring in anybody. I don't care if they are good or bad. Bring them to my party!" The King wants people at his party. Remember that the subjects of the King are the Jewish people that turned away from the Christ, and so now he invites the stragglers, the Gentiles to come. That is what Jesus is pointing to this parable.

Finally we find in there is one person who shows up at the wedding banquet and they are not properly dressed for the wedding, and they are cast out into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. This part of the parable has always disturbed me. Why, if this guy took the time to show up, is he cast into outer darkness? Well, and I could say the answer to that today. You will have to come back next week for that.

So we here we have this picture of hell, and of judgment, and of the grace of God. God has a party in store for you and God longs for you to be whole and healed. That is what he made you for—to spend eternity with him. He does not want you to perish but he wants you to have everlasting life. He extends that invitation to you over and over and over again.

But somewhere it you have to say “yes.” Somewhere along the way you respond, because God is not going to force you to come to his party. He is going to give you a choice to the very end. Nobody is sent by God to hell.

We make our choices. We choose to walk in a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth and that is why the Bible gives us these pictures that are so awful. They are telling us, "Don't go to that place where God's presence cannot be felt. Instead, choose life."

There was a study several years ago of people who had died under cardiac arrest and then were resuscitated. There were about 344 people who were surveyed. 18% of those had near-death experiences. That tells us that not everybody has a near-death experience, but about one in five do. They describe their experiences in much the same way. Most of them were positive but they did find that somewhere between 3% and 15% of

people who have near-death experiences have a negative near-death experience. They have hellish kind of experiences.

When it comes to near-death experiences please don't go by the latest book and think that will fill in the gaps in Scripture. They can be helpful and interesting to read, and some of those experiences are profound and beautiful, but we also must remember that near-death experiences are interpreted through the lands of the individual person. People might come up with things that don't even agree with the Bible or share ideas that you might not agree with, so always look at them keeping Scripture in mind.

One of the hellish near-death experiences that I came across was by a man Howard Storm who considered himself an atheist. Howard was an art professor at Northern Kentucky University for 20 years. He had gone to church as a small child but as an adult he decided he didn't need any of that and he did not believe in God.

In 1985, Mr. Storm, 38, and his wife, Beverly, were in Paris on the last day of an art tour. Buckled over by searing pain in the middle of his stomach, he was rushed to the hospital. Awaiting emergency surgery, he knew he was dying. He said good-bye to his wife and drifted into darkness.

Standing up, he realized he was between two hospital beds. He looked at Beverly, who was motionless, staring at the floor, sitting in the chair next to his bed. He spoke to her, but she didn't seem to hear.

As he bent over to look at the face of the body in the bed, he was horrified to see the resemblance that it had to his own face. But he knew that was impossible because he was standing over the person and looking at him.

Off in the distance, outside the room in the hall, he heard voices calling him. They were pleasant voices, male and female, young and old, calling to him in English.

"Come out here," they said. "Don't you want to get better?"

He stepped out into the hall, full of anxiety. The area seemed to be light but very hazy, and he couldn't make out any details.

He followed them shuffling along in his bare feet with the memory of pain in his belly, yet feeling very much alive. The fog thickened as they went on, and it became gradually darker.

Overwhelmed with hopelessness, he told them he would go no farther and that they were liars. He could feel their breath on him as they shouted and snarled insults.

Then they began to push and shove him about, and he began to fight back. A wild frenzy of taunting, screaming and hitting ensued. As he swung and kicked at them, they bit him.

Even though he couldn't see anything in the darkness, he was aware there were dozens or hundreds of them all around and over him and that his attempts to fight back only provoked greater merriment.

They began to tear off pieces of his flesh, and he realized that he was being taken apart and eaten alive, methodically, slowly, so that their entertainment would last as long as possible. In that wretched state he lay there in the darkness.

Suddenly remembering a prayer from childhood Sunday School class, he said, "Yea though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

To his amazement, the cruel merciless beings were incited to rage by his prayer. They screamed at him, "There is no God! Nobody can hear you!" But at the same time they were backing away. He realized that saying things about God was actually driving them away, and he became more forceful. They became more rabid, cursing and screaming against God, but in time, they retreated back into the distant gloom beyond his hearing.

Alone, destroyed, and yet painfully alive in this horrible place, he yelled out into the darkness, "Jesus, save me."

Far off in the darkness, he saw a pinpoint of light like the faintest star in the sky. The star became brighter and brighter. As it came closer, he realized that he was right in its path, and he might be consumed by its brilliance.

This was a living being approximately 8 feet tall and surrounded by an oval of radiance. The brilliant intensity of the light penetrated his body. Ecstasy swept away the agony. Tangible hands and arms gently embraced him and lifted him up. He slowly rose up into the presence of the light, and the torn pieces of his body miraculously healed before his eyes.

He went on to leave his career as an art teacher and he became a pastor of a United Church of Christ congregation. That part of his story is consistent with what we read in Scriptures that there is a place where there

is utter darkness and weeping and loneliness. There is a deep longing to be alive in a deep longing for love and is found nowhere. This man seems to be given a second chance.

I interviewed a member of our congregation who had a near-death experience and you are going to hear that full interview in a few weeks. But at the end of the interview Tara shared a recent experience he has had with her grandfather who was dying. I want you to hear this piece of her story because it's very powerful.

VIDEO Tara's Grandfather

All of that leads me to give this invitation to you. In the end, all of the scriptural teaching about Hell is really designed for one thing, and that is to convince you to respond to God's grace. Why would you turn your back on God's grace? Why would you turn your back on the party? Why would you not want to spend eternity in a place where there is joy and hope and absolute and utter love? Why would you turn away from that?

Would you bow your heads with me? It would be inappropriate for me to preach a sermon today on what the Bible teaches about Hell and our conceptions of it without inviting you to respond to God's invitation to heaven. I know some of you are sitting here you are sophisticated people. You still don't even know what to think about all this, and you know as a pastor sometimes I don't either.

What I do know is that I would long to be, after this life, in a place that expands upon the greatest experiences of my life here on earth—a place where there is peace and joy and hope in life. I don't want to be in a place where I am utterly annihilated, and in outer darkness, whatever that might be like. That is not a place I want to be. God has invited us to his party and all we have to do is say "yes."

I am going to offer a prayer. I will say a line and then you can respond if you wish under your breath, or you can say your own prayer. I invite you to do, whether you are a longtime Christian or someone who for the first time today wants to accept the grace of Christ, to say this prayer.

Thank you God for inviting me to your banquet. I am sorry I have turned my back on you, at times made light of you. Forgive me. I want to live in a place where there is light. I want to live with you. Jesus Christ save me. I accept your gift of life. Help me to follow you. In your holy name, amen.