

SE011903

## CROSSING OVER

### 3. Hell

This morning, I want to talk to about a place that does not get talked about very often. It is generally considered impolite in our day to even bring it up. It's described in imagery that's dark and bleak. Nobody thinks they're going to end up here, but people do. I want to talk to you today... about Canada.

Seriously, hell is one of the things people use to attack Christianity as barbaric and backward – it's the grounds upon which people impugn the Goodness of God. They say,  
*"the God I believe in is compassionate, so I don't believe in hell, it's a detestable, horrible belief."*

Well, I agree that it IS a detestable, horrible thing, but that doesn't mean it's incompatible with a God of compassion. In fact, it may be that there's something about a compassionate God that REQUIRES a hell.

Before we get to that, let's deal with common objections to the idea of HELL.

#### **1. Is God some kind of sadistic tyrant who likes sending people to hell?**

I want to be clear about this because the Bible is absolutely clear about this. Hear this: No one on earth, not the kindest, most compassionate person on earth wants ALL people to spend eternity in heaven with God **one-millionth** as much as God does.

- In John 3:17 Jesus says, "God did not send his Son into the world to **condemn** the world but in order that the world" - **all human beings** - "might be saved through him."
- 2 Peter 3:9 says: "The Lord is not willing that **any** should perish"
- Ezek. 18:23 "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked!"

Jesus says hell was not even made for humans at all – but rather for the devil and his fallen angels. If we join with the same pride of those spirits against God's rule, their lot will be our lot. But God never intended any of us go there.

As much as I'd like the doctrine of hell to go away, God had done all he could to **make** it go away. We have this saying. If we really don't want someone to do something, we'll say,  
*"...over my dead body."*

Jesus says to the human race, *"you're going to have to go to hell over my dead body."* He says the only way to get there, is to get around, or trod over the cross where he died. The cross is the ultimate symbol of the infinite price that God will pay, so that all human beings can spend eternity with him. He paved the way so no one would have to experience hell.

All that's required is the free choice to abandon pride, turn from sin, and embrace mercy.

## 2. If an all-powerful God doesn't want anyone to go to hell, why do people end up there?

The short answer to this is: because God treats human freedom with the utmost seriousness; because God is love and you can't love if you're not free. In John 3:19 Jesus describes what we've done with this freedom:

here's the verdict. People love darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.

Let me say something that may surprise you: there are some things God **cannot** do, not because he lacks the power, but because of the *kind of world* he choose to create. For example, God CANNOT destroy the pink elephants on Venus. Likewise God cannot control every aspect of creatures to whom he has given REAL freedom.

If you're thinking that everyone goes to heaven somehow, the question you have to ask is, WITH THEIR CONSENT OR WITHOUT IT?

What if someone doesn't want God? And you may say, "come on Rick, **everyone** wants God". I totally disagree. Everyone wants some version of heaven they have in their head. But on whose terms do we want heaven? Our terms or God's? On the day Adolph Hitler killed himself, do you think God said to him:

***"name your terms, sir, we've got a universal acceptance policy around here. You get in whether you wanted to or not."***

And Hitler responds,

"OK, first thing you gotta do is clear out all the Jews."

Do you really wish for a God, who would just want fellas like Stalin, Hussein, or Idi Amin, to just keep on trucking into eternity, without a course correction? Without a clear cut moment when the awful abuse of their FREE WILL is made to appear to them what it appears to the rest of us, and to God himself?

...as a mistake, as evil?

And it's not good to only talk about the really bad dudes. We have to ask ourselves, how have I used or abused MY free will? Can you point to times in your life when you have said in your heart:

"I don't want you God. I don't want to order my life by your ways. I don't want to know you. I don't want to acknowledge my sin or the price your Son paid for me. Here's my free decision: Leave me alone!"

Some people say, well, if God so forgiving, why doesn't he just forgive? He can't. The completed transaction of forgiveness is a two way street. Forgiveness can be offered as God does freely to ALL. But, to be **accepted** there has to be some acknowledgment of offense and need.

*A person who admits no guilt can receive no forgiveness.*

That's why the Bible says, only those who "call on the Name of the Lord will be saved." There's faith, confession, repentance initiative you must take.

### **3. The nightmarish torture of hellfire is inconsistent with God's love.**

A lot medieval art like you see here, gave us such grotesque images of hell, such hideous, images of fire, and demons and sulfur – that it backfired! Instead of being a sober warning, it's now a colorful metaphor, a punch line.

So, our picture of hell these days is determined by Far Side cartoons. Like this one:



What we need to understand is that, we must not confuse the reality of hell with the symbols the Bible uses to describe it. For example, fire is a common symbol, but Jesus also calls hell, "the place OUTSIDE, the place of outer darkness." How can a place with fire, be dark? And then again, sometimes it's called a pit and other times a lake.

The point of these symbols must be to communicate the nature of the place, not to satisfy our curiosity about the temperature or the décor! The point is, in all his words about hell, Jesus is really communicating three aspects of what it's like. They are...

- PUNISHMENT
- DESTRUCTION
- and DEPRIVATION.

That's the point of the frightening language Jesus uses. It's a sober and fair warning: The stakes are high. How you live your life is not a dress rehearsal. This is final run through.

If we want to know what hell is like, Jesus gives us one interesting description: "in hell your body and soul are destroyed." So what do you think it's like to have your soul destroyed? Well, it must mean that we don't remain the way we are now. Our consciousness will be altered, diminished. That doesn't mean we cease to exist, however. Let me give you a picture:

When I used to plant trees, I saw a lot of red rot. Red rot, is what *used to be* a tree. Sometimes you could make out the outline of an old tree that was now getting sucked into the forest floor as it decomposed. You really couldn't say that it was a tree anymore. It was now "the stuff formerly known as a tree." Kind of like Prince.

When you burn a log, you don't actually wipe it out do you? You've destroyed the log, you've tormented it, so to speak, and you've deprived it of it's tree like qualities. But it still exists, as something else now; it's carbon, ash, and a series of lifeless chemicals. **This is what hell does.**

I wouldn't say it's filled with people per se, it's filled with the "remains" of people. In fact, the word Jesus often used for hell was the same word used for the city garbage dump!

#### **4. At least I'll be with my buddies and there will be no rules.**

Some imagine hell like a 24/7 Bud Light commercial. Wine, women and song! But they miss this important fact: if there are aspects of this life which are pleasurable, it's because God is still active and present on earth. Just because you find pleasure, friendship, sex, and love in a bar, doesn't mean God wasn't in those things.

Without God, everything that was great about life goes with it. So life on earth can be both a foretaste of heaven AND of hell. Sometimes simple pleasures are a wakeup call, God is saying YOU WERE MADE FOR THIS! Sometimes, the deprivations of life are a wakeup call, God is saying, this is life without me, avoid this!

Before Johnna and I got married, we sat down in Regina, SK on a frozen afternoon in the middle of winter and planned our honeymoon. Our friends, Tim and Jen Bergmann were planning on being in California after our wedding, so we thought it would be fun to rendezvous with them in LA. **But, where should we meet?**

Having never been down there, we thought, one California beach is same as the next, right? So, we took a pen and dropped it blindly on a map: SAN ONOFRE beach. Six months later, we're married and on our honeymoon and it comes time to rendezvous with our friends. We pull in to SAN ONOFRE... and the place is a **hole!**

First, the campsite is actually a parking lot, right off the freeway, no water, no power for air-conditioning. Which was a problem since it was August 24<sup>th</sup> and 120° outside! When we went to the beach, we happened to notice a huge nuclear power plant nearby. All the surfers were glowing.

Getting to the beach, required fighting our way through twisted thorn bushes only to see these harsh signs, "DO NOT SWIM HERE... YOU'LL GROW A THIRD EYE". And the worst part was, Tim and Jen hadn't shown up. They were in southern California somewhere, maybe lost, who knew?

The next day, what a different experience. It had cooled down, the Geiger counter wasn't yet reading high levels of radioactive contamination, AND as we pulled out at the gate, they gave us a note, left there by Tim and Jen! We had gotten our days wrong and the note said they were waiting for us at Disney Land!

Now, my point is California is hell. No, it's that one earthly experience was a very little taste of hell and heaven, One day:

- **pain**, the sweltering heat and physical discomfort;
- **destruction**, we turned from happy honeymooners into something else;
- **deprivation**, we were expecting to see friends, and we didn't get to.

Then the next day...

- instead pain of we were **rewarded** with Disneyland,
- instead of destruction, we felt **new life**, rejuvenation and
- instead of deprivation, we had **community** with our friends.

In fact, there's another metaphor for hell used in the Bible. Jesus said, Hell is the place outside the banquet hall. In hell, you are utterly deprived, utterly alone, shut out.

### **5. The justice is goofy: there's huge disproportion between temporal sins and eternal punishment.**

One skeptic writes,

"don't get me wrong, there's plenty of people I'd like to see in hell - FOR A TIME. But even I'd get tired of hearing Hitler scream after a couple of hundred years. Wouldn't the 'fun' wear off? After that, I'd just kill him. Why doesn't God just put him out of his misery."

In response to this, we need to remember that Jesus taught, hell is what people choose; they choose the darkness over the light. So in one sense, we might say that though hell is a nightmare to anyone not there, to those inside, it's what they asked for, what they WANT – even while they live in regret.

This is not altogether unheard of in our own experience: The alcoholic gets to a place where he loves his bottle over his wife, his kids, his job and all he finally wants is for them to leave him alone. Now, the rest of us call this kind of life, WHAT? **A living hell!** Make no mistake, the man PREFERS his booze to life, freedom, health, relationships, and love. He CHOOSES to drink, he gets what he wants, and what he wants, is hell.

Now why does it have to be forever? We don't know. It just seems the nature of a spiritual being is that they don't die. It's a law, like in our universe now, matter cannot be created or destroyed. Spirits, once created are never annihilated, they are eternal.

Now, will that eternity be experienced the same by all, no matter how bad or ignorant they were? Jesus seems to indicate the answer is no. Luke 12:47-48

That servant who knows his master's will and ...does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows.

Here's what we know: God is fair. Whatever hell is, it's consistent with that.

### **6. Why doesn't God give people a second chance?**

Some people think that maybe hell is full of people saying,

*"God, if only I had another change, I would change," and that God is saying, "Sorry, you had your chance. It's too late now, forget it."*

The Bible says that God is not willing that any should perish, which means if it would help to

give people a million chances, God would give them.

But, all of our lives are taking on a trajectory, a sort of momentum. We have a saying, “Crusty Old Man”, when we see a person who has reached old age and the momentum along a path of gloom and joylessness is unstoppable. It’s like clay, at the start, it’s really pliable, but after it’s set for a bit, you can change it less and less, until there’s no changing it at all.

This is why the Bible teaches that after death, there is judgment. There comes a point that change is impossible, that all attempts to reach someone have failed. There comes a time when chemotherapy is useless, the cancer permeates the whole person. It also doesn’t take a lot of faith to believe God knows when time is up and further remedial cures are futile.

CS Lewis once said, “the gates of hell are locked... FROM THE INSIDE.” We might say that to a person in hell, there is only one place they’d rather NOT be: heaven.

So, in the light of these objections to Hell, WHAT ARE YOU ASKING GOD TO DO?

- ARE YOU ASKING FOR a another chance to turn to God, to freely learn what it means to Love Him? But friend, that’s what Life IS! This IS our chance, our chances! But with our chances, we choose sin and separation instead.
- ARE YOU ASKING GOD to wipe away those sins, to spare no expense in bringing opportunity for a new start, to go to every possible length, to offer every miraculous help to turn us around and spare us this fate? He’s already done that. On a Roman cross 2000 years ago.
- ARE YOU ASKING GOD TO forgive them? Just unilaterally absolve them? What if they will not be forgiven, what if they will not bend or repent?
- MAYBE YOU’RE ASKING GOD TO just leave them alone? I’m afraid... that is EXACTLY what he does. Because of all the things that describe hell, the most telling is this: hell is the place (2 Thessalonians 1:9) where God isn’t.

Keep something in mind. We see, the body, but God sees the soul. One day the masks will come off and there will be surprises.

- some very good people are going to be revealed as the sons of the Devil, yes even people who have God on their lips a lot... not because they didn’t look good, but because they wished God away and God grants their wish.
- some great sinners will be revealed as the very sons of God, saints, glorious creatures in eternity because they surrendered to God’s healing work through his Son.

## **CONCLUSION**

So, is this theory or reality? You choose. But let me leave you with this true story. Dr Maurice Rawlings (cardiologist) has written a book about his observations of near death experiences – specifically what he calls, the missing hell cases.

It all started when Charlie McKraig, a 48 year old mail carrier came in for an EKG to check out chest pain. They got Charlie on a treadmill and soon the heart monitor showed a rapid, dangerous beat, then flat-line. Surprisingly, Charlie continued to talk for a while, unaware that his heart had totally stopped. Four or five seconds later, his eyes rolled up in his head and he collapsed, the treadmill sweeping him away like a bag of trash.

Quickly, they went to surgery to insert a pace maker wire into his heart. I'll let the Dr tell the rest of the story:

I entered the big vein under the collar bone, but blood was spurting everywhere. Whenever I stopped pushing on his chest in order to adjust the pacemaker, the heart would stop, and Charlie's eyes would roll up, he would turn blue and convulse.

With bare hands, I would reach over and start him up again. But this time he was screaming the words, "Don't Stop! I'm in hell! I'm in hell!"

Hallucinations, I thot. Most victims say, "take you big hands off me, you're breaking my ribs." But he was saying the opposite: "for God's sake, don't stop! Don't you understand? Every time you let go I'm back in hell!"

Finally, he asked me to pray for him. I told him to shut up. I said I was a doctor, not a minister. But the nurses gave me that... look. That's when I composed a make believe prayer. I made him repeat the make-believe prayer word for word to keep him off my back. Meanwhile, I resuscitated with one hand and adjusted the pacemaker with the other.

"Say it! Jesus Christ is the Son of God...go on and say it!" I said. "Keep me out of hell and if I live, I'm on the hook. I'm yours. Go on, say it!"

And then a very strange thing happened that changed our lives. A religious conversion experience took place. I had never witnessed one before. He was no longer the wild-eyed, screaming, combative lunatic who had been fighting me for his life. He was relaxed and calm and cooperative. It frightened me.

I was shaken by the events. It was a conviction I cannot express even to this day. This miserable prayer of mine had opened the door to my own conversion. The lesson? Don't say make-believe prayers. They can work. And they can dissect your soul, like surgeon's scalpel. And that's what stimulated me to search for the mysteriously missing "hell cases"... from those who had been beyond death's door.