

Theology for Life
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 31: Future Hope—Our Afterlife

Last Time: *Baptism and the Lord's Supper are means of grace that apply to us the benefits of Christ. Baptism is a converting ordinance. The Lord's Supper is a confirming ordinance.*

After Death: What happens to us when we die?

WCF 32.1. *The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Besides these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.*

The Importance of Hell

Hell is a sobering and challenging subject. To many, the thought of eternal torture is unjust and unloving.

What condemns someone to hell? It is NOT primarily a failure to believe in Jesus. This misconception leads to all sorts of bad theology. Under this view people are right to raise very serious questions about God's goodness.

Romans 1:18-25 explains that all know our duty to worship God but we suppress that truth in our unrighteousness and turn to worship other things.

Romans 3:10-12 ESV

[10] as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; [11] no one understands; no one seeks for God. [12] All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

"It is important to note here the question Paul struggles to answer is not the modern one: 'Would a loving God really send good people to hell?' Instead, Paul addresses this: 'How could a just and holy God ever declare guilty sinners to be righteous in his sight?' The contours of Paul's answer are that we are all sinners and therefore guilty, and our just punishment is hell. Most importantly, only Jesus' saving work—his death and resurrection—can atone for sins." Morgan and Peterson, "What is Hell?"

One way to avoid any tension between God's love and justice has been the **doctrine of universalism**, or the belief that all will be saved.

J.I. Packer, while not advocating universalism, understands the appeal: *"No evangelical, I think, need hesitate to admit that in his heart of hearts he would like universalism to be true. Who can take pleasure in the thought of people being eternally lost? If you want to see folks damned, there is something wrong with you."*

More and more evangelicals have gone beyond Packer's sorrow over hell to a stronger advocacy for universalism. One very popular modern expression of this is *Love Wins*, Rob Bell's 2011 *New York Times Best Seller*.

As Francis Chan observes:

*"In his book Love Wins, [Rob] Bell...presents this position in such favorable terms that it would be hard to say that he is not advocating it. He even says the traditional view of a literal hell that features eternal torment is not "good news" at all. To use Bell's phrase, "The good news is better than that." He implies **the view that all people will eventually be saved is actually much better news**. So while he never says that this is the correct view, Bell certainly presents this view as the good view and the traditional view of hell as the bad view."* Chan, Francis, *Erasing Hell*

Universalism is relatively new desire in orthodox Christians. In a helpful historical survey, Richard Buckham writes:

"Until the nineteenth century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell. Here and there, outside the theological mainstream, were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated...Even fewer were the advocates of universal salvation...Eternal punishment was firmly asserted in official creeds and confessions of the churches. It must have seemed as indispensable a part of universal Christian belief as the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation."
Buckham, "Universalism: a historical survey"

Hell is Punishment

- *Banishment/Absence of God*
 - "Depart from me" Matthew 7:21-23
 - Being outside or excluded from the kingdom or in outer darkness (Matthew 8:12; 13:41-42, 49-50)
- *Destruction/ Dehumanizing*
 - [13] "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. [14] For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. Matthew 7:13-14
- *Place of Suffering*
 - "unquenchable fire" Matthew 3:12
 - worse than being drowned at sea Mark 9:42
 - worse than any earthly suffering (Matthew 5:29-20)
 - Weeping and gnashing of teeth Matthew 8:12
- *Eternal*
 - "Their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched" Isa 66:22, 24
 - "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Daniel 12:2
 - "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Matthew 25:46

This is probably the aspect of God's justice that is hardest for us to embrace. Yet, it is one of the clearest from Scripture. In fact, every single New Testament author not only mentions hell, but describes it as punishment.

Matthew 5:20-26; Mark 9:42-48; Luke 16:19-31; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Hebrews 10:27-31; James 5:1-5; 2 Peter 2:4-17; Jude 1:13-23; Revelation 20:10-15

We must not forget the goodness of justice

"...there must be such a thing as judgment. Judgment—the sovereign declaration that this is good and to be upheld and vindicated, and that is evil and to be condemned—is the only alternative to chaos. There are some things, quite a lot of them in fact, that one must not tolerate lest one merely collude with wickedness."

N.T. Wright Surprised by Hope

"If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence—that God would not be worthy of worship...The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate only when it comes from God...My thesis that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many...in the West...[But] it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence [results from the belief in] God's refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die...[with] other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind." Volf *Exclusion and Embrace*

Who Sends Someone to Hell?

We just saw how scripture explains hell as God's active punishment. But in a very real sense the answer to the above question is "you send yourself."

"We want to choose and go our own way (Isaiah 53:6.) This is no idle 'wandering from the path.' As Jeremiah puts it, 'No one repents . . . each pursues his own course like a horse charging into battle. (8:6)' (We want to get away from God-but, as we have seen, this is the very thing that is most destructive to us. Cain is warned not to sin because sin is slavery. (Genesis 4:7; John 8:34.) It destroys your ability to choose, love, enjoy. Sin also brings blindness-the more you reject the truth about God the more incapable you are of perceiving any truth about yourself or the world (Isaiah 29:9-10; Romans 1:21.)" Keller, "Importance of Hell"

"If the thing you most want is to worship God in the beauty of his holiness, then that is what you will get (Ps 96:9-13.) If the thing you most want is to be your own master, then the holiness of God will become an agony, and the presence of God a terror you will flee forever (Rev 6:16; cf. Is 6:1-6.)" Keller "Importance of Hell"

C.S. Lewis: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it" (*The Great Divorce*, p.72).

God is said "to pass by" the reprobate and "to give them up" to their own desires.

Heaven and The Resurrection

WCF 30.2. *At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead shall be raised up, with the selfsame bodies, and none other (although with different qualities), which shall be united again to their souls forever.*

The Bible presents the Christian hope in bodily terms (in distinction from others that view the body in a negative way). This embodied hope is expressed in terms of a bodily resurrection and new creation.

1Cor. 15:51 *Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed – 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.*

1Th. 4:16 *For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.*

I.e. The Assembly understood the scriptures to teach that salvation is not *from* the body but *including* the body such that the ultimate form of salvation is when the soul and body are reunited after the return of Christ. Thus the doctrine of "resurrection!" And by "resurrection" it is meant the *same* body restored, not a different body. In other words, the key thing to observe here is the continuity between our body in this world and the next, even as this is very significant in terms of the way we think about salvation and the cosmos!

Compare OT and NT visions of our hope

- Isaiah 65:17 *"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.*
- Revelation 21:1 *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.*

Importance of a Bodily Hope

"The point of the resurrection...is that the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die...What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it...What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God's future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether (as the hymn so mistakenly puts it...). They are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom." NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope*

Connecting the Dots: Where Theology meets Life

Summary: All people after death will face a Final Judgment. Believers will be immediately brought into God's presence and await the future resurrection and new creation. Those outside of Christ will face the condemnation of Hell.