

An Unimaginably Horrible End

II Peter 2:4

This morning I would like to address a very uncomfortable topic. It is one that in many churches and homes and Bible studies and water cooler conversations has become the elephant in the room. We naturally want everything to turn out well in the end, but in this case it doesn't. So we avoid it. It would without a doubt be rated R on any Hollywood screen.

It's the kind of topic that causes mothers to bring their children in tight against their apron to cover their little eyes and ears. If even the strongest person fully comprehended it they would shudder in horror and cower in fear.

It's avoided for a variety of reasons.

Some choose not to believe it.

Others are afraid of it.

In a 2015 Pew Research Poll, they found that only 70% of Christians believe in it. You might think that's a pretty good number but I would say that's a concern, especially when you consider that 6% more Muslims believe in it than Christians.

Among other religious groups, 22% of Jews, 32% of Buddhists and 28% of Hindus believe in it.

Among those who don't affiliate with any religion, 3% of Atheists and 9% of Agnostics believe in it.

Let's read our verse.

II Peter 2:4

I am opting to skip to verse 4 today and deal specifically with one topic. Next week we will go back and look at the opening verses and then come back to verse 4 and consider the verse as a whole. Our topic for today is about hell. It's a topic you don't hear many sermons about other than maybe touching on it in passing.

By show of hands, how many of you have never heard a message just on hell?

Is it possible that many preachers avoid preaching

and teaching about it because they don't want people to get a bad impression about themselves, they don't want the message to offend or frighten? Maybe, like all good fairy tales, they want the story to end up with everyone happy.

I would say that by and large the message of hell has been softened by the church.

Today will be a difficult message.

It's a difficult message not because there is little information in the Bible about it.

It's a difficult message because I'm afraid I won't be able to convey accurately the horror of what Scripture teaches about the topic and place of hell. I read about a pastor on the east coast who preached 76 one hour messages on hell. That might be a way to empty the church.

I will do my best to share with you the reality of hell, the reason for hell, the retribution in hell, and the response to hell. While the horrors of hell are real and beyond comprehension, there is hope and help available to avoid it.

I. THE REALITY OF HELL

Hell is a term that is often used as an expression of cursing. People trivialize it. Maybe they take the concept lightly in an attempt to lessen its reality or its horrors. They joke about it or in a fit of anger wish an enemy would end up there. Some joke about things that are frightening to maybe take some of the sting or bite out of it thereby reducing its power or impact. We have even named a town after it and have races through it so people can say they ran through hell – and survived.

In some research that George Barna conducted 39% believe that hell is a state of eternal separation from God's presence, 32% say it's an actual place of torment and suffering where souls go after they die. 13% says it is just a symbol of an unknown bad outcome after death. 16% weren't sure what hell was or didn't believe in an afterlife.

Some will suggest that an especially difficult life

event was for them a hellish experience. Some who have fought in combat or spent time in prison say that “war is hell” or “prison is hell”. Some will say after going through months of painful rehabilitation after a car accident that it was hell. They don’t mean it literally, but rather in a descriptive manner that the experience was horrific. Yet there is no experience this side of the grave that will ever compare to the understanding of what hell is like. Nothing a person will ever go through will be like it or prepare them for it.

Hell is a real place.

It is not the figment of an overstimulated imagination.

This earth and the most horrible, unimaginable experiences here is not hell.

In 1967, agnostic British philosopher Bertrand Russell said “there is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ’s moral character, and that is that He believed in hell.” He went on to say that the idea of eternal punishment for sin, is a “doctrine that put cruelty in the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture.”

So if I understand him right, he’s saying that by believing in hell we have cruelty in the world. If there is no hell or even concept of hell, everyone would get along and we’d all be singing “We are the World” or “Kumbaya” around the camp fire.

Steve McSwain is a speaker, author, Counselor to Congregations, Ambassador to the Council on the Parliament for the World’s Religions, and Spiritual Teacher. The title of an article he wrote is “*Why I Do Not Believe in Hell*”.

I won’t bore you with the article so let me condense his thoughts. He basically believes that acts of love, compassion, and forgiveness are the compelling actions and attitudes that eliminate the notion of hell. He cites the incident in the Charleston, South Carolina church where folks were killed during Bible Study. Instead of open hostility and hatred

toward the killer, they decided to show compassion and forgiveness. He says that love and compassion mitigate the concept of hell, although admittedly he hopes there might be such a place for all the Hitler’s of the world. But in the end he can’t conceive of his friends spending time in hell, if there is such a place, especially knowing he was in heaven and they were in hell. So he concluded his article by saying: “God, allow me to exchange places, please, because, if You’re expecting me to be happy floating around in heaven on a cloud singing hymns about your compassion and grace and love all day long, knowing some of my friends and others are suffering in hell...You’re wrong. You’re dead wrong. In fact, Your heaven has just become my hell!”

Yet there are those like religious philosopher John Hick who says that hell is nothing more than a “grim fantasy” that is not only “morally revolting”, it is also a “serious perversion of the Christian gospel.”

If that isn’t bad enough evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock dismisses hell with this question: “How can one imagine for a moment that the God who gave His Son to die for sinners because of His great love for them would install a torture chamber somewhere in the new creation in order to subject those who reject Him to everlasting pain?”

But hell is a real place, and a real place of torment. We will get to that in a moment.

As a matter of fact, if people knew the horror that awaited them, they would do all they could to avoid it. They wouldn’t be so glib when they say that it’s nothing more than a country club or if my friends are going to be there, that’s where I want to go.

Let me tell you what hell is not.

1. Annihilationism

Some believe that at death you just cease to exist. There is no afterlife for the non-Christian, they just “POOF” vanish into nothingness. They don’t believe there is a hell, just nothing.

Others who hold this view believe there will be some level or time of punishment, but then after time served will just vanish from existence.

They claim that because of God's love He can't envision punishing anyone even for very long so they just disappear.

2. Inclusivism

This view believes in a hell but claims that only people who heard the gospel and rejected it will actually go there. Those who never heard the gospel will go to heaven not hell because they can't be blamed for never having heard. They never got the chance to believe so they aren't responsible or punished.

I think Scripture is quite clear that only if you believe in Jesus Christ will you be saved. John 3:16 tells us that if you don't believe in Christ you will perish and won't have eternal life. Romans 1:20 says no one is without excuse.

A professor at a religious college in New York said of hell "It's there...hell is...but possible that no one will go there."

3. Universalism

This view says everyone eventually will be saved.

But like annihilationism, what's the point, if you either cease to exist because you don't believe hell exists or you eventually will get to heaven anyway, just go ahead and live it up. Party on. Don't worry about being a goody two shoes or living by the golden rule, go for the gusto.

That seems to be a big waste of space if no one is going there. Or is it there as an incentive to mind your proverbial p's and q's and follow the straight and narrow road? If what he says is true and no one will go there then the Bible is wrong and it can't be trusted because It says that hell is real and that people will go there forever.

But hell does exist. Most of what we learn about hell is in the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke from what Jesus taught? If you count up all the

verses Jesus spoke about heaven and hell, He had more to say on hell than He did on heaven. It's real because

Jesus said so. He even gave a description of it.

Here's the thing, if you only get one thing from what I say today or rather what Scripture says about hell, let it be this – Unless and until we come to fully understand the reality of hell and the unimaginable, excruciating suffering that people will endure there for eternity, we will never be compelled to urgently plead with people to trust Christ and turn from their sin.

It's real because the Bible and Jesus said so. He spoke about it in Matthew 5:22, 29, 30.

The word Jesus used for hell is Gehenna. His audience would all be familiar with this valley that was just outside Jerusalem to the southwest. It was a steep, rocky, deep and narrow ravine. During the reign of Solomon, after his heart was turned from following God by following the detestable false gods of his many wives, he began the practice of offering sacrifices to Molech and built an altar in this valley (I Kings 11:7). People honored this false god by sacrificing their children by fire. In II Kings 16:3 and II Chronicles 28:3 King Ahaz and King Manasseh intensified the practice. When King Josiah came to the throne he got rid of that abomination. He defiled the altar by spreading human bones and trash on the site (II Kings 23:10, 13, 14). It became the city dump described in Unger's Bible Dictionary as "the common cesspool of the city". Sewage was poured into this valley that was then carried off by the Kidron River. It became the city's dump where the trash was burned and it burned all the time. The Valley of Hinnom or Gehenna became a symbol of the perpetual burning fires of hell where those who reject Christ would be sent. The Jews understood the reference to Gehenna or hell being a place of eternal torment.

The term Jesus used in verse 22 "you fool" referred to a sinful heart and demonstrated that such a

person was destined to end up in hell.

Matthew 10:28

This passage demonstrates both the unlimited and eternal nature of God's power to bring punishment on the person who rejects the gospel. He is the only one who can determine the eternal destiny of the individual based on whether or not that person has repented of sin and trusted Christ as Savior.

Jesus also taught on hell in Matthew chapters 11; 18; 23; and 25. Most of what the Bible teaches about hell is from Jesus. Hell is a reality, but what is its purpose. Consider the reason for hell.

II. THE REASON FOR HELL

Matthew 25:41

Initially it was a place prepared for the devil and his fallen angels.

But with man's fall and the passing on of the sin nature to every person hell is the destiny of anyone who rejects Christ. It also becomes for them a place of perpetual suffering.

John wrote very simply and clearly about the reason for hell. It's found in his first epistle.

I John 5:11-13

There it is in black and white. If you don't have the Son, you don't have life. It's not annihilationism. It's real. It's punishment. It's hell.

But along with the curse in the garden came hope in the promised Messiah, the One who would take our sin and die in our place. By trusting in Him we are given life, eternal life. Faith gives us a different destiny than hell.

Let's be very clear about one thing. From Luke 19:10 we read that Jesus came to save the lost, to save those headed to hell to rescue us from our eternal plight and punishment.

John MacArthur writes "The message of Scripture

is that salvation is a rescue, a rescue from a real place called hell."

In an article titled *Hold the Fire and Brimstone, Please*, author Burk Parsons writes "The subject of the eternal destinies of human beings is not a footnote to the Gospel, it is at the heart of understanding the very essence of the Gospel. We would not need mercy if we had no sin, and we would not need grace if we had no future. God bestows His grace upon us not merely so we can get a fire ticket out of hell. In fact, in preaching fire and brimstone, the Lord graciously provides us with a bad impression of ourselves so that we might be offended by our sin and turn to Him in repentance and faith through Christ."

Psychologists and Psychiatrists want us to believe that we're okay, we're all innately good. Yes, there are some rotten apples out there, but essentially we're good people. But the Bible says otherwise. We are all sinners. There is no one who is righteous and to coin a phrase from the last election quoting the words of Hilary Clinton – yes, we are all deplorable, not just conservative right wing, gun-toting, Bible quoting, xenophobic, homophobic, anaerobic Christians. We are all deplorable. And the Bible says we all deserve death. We all deserve to be punished in this place called hell.

If God did not mete out justice on those who deserve it then He is neither loving or holy or just. Because He is holy He must punish sin and that means a place of punishment and that place is hell. And because He is infinite and eternal, the place for which they are destined will also be eternal because they will continue to sin for eternity. There will be no repentance in hell. That destiny is forever sealed. Their punishment will continue as long as the sinning continues.

There won't be a second chance.

There won't be a change of heart or mind.

There won't be parole or pardon.

There won't be the opportunity to work it off or for someone to pray you out.

That is the destiny of those who refuse Christ, who don't have the Son, who won't believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved.

Tom Ascol writes in *The Horror of Hell* that there are four truths about hell that should cause us to grieve over the prospect of anyone experiencing its horrors.

First is that hell is a state of separation from God. Matthew 25 describes the scene at judgment. In verse 41 He tells those on His left to depart from them because He doesn't know them. Jesus uses the same language in Matthew 7:23 to describe the final judgment of unbelievers. To be separated from God does not mean that He will be absent. It means they will forever be separated from anything and everything that is good about Him. Right now, here on earth, whether they admit it or not, they experience God's grace, mercy and goodness. They enjoy the blessings of food, rain, breath, life, sunshine, seasons, even some joy and peace and pleasure. They don't receive instant judgment, condemnation, instant death, instant pain and misery.

There will be none of that in hell. In the story Jesus told in Luke 16:19-31 about the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man ends up in torment. What he experienced in hell nothing like what he had on earth. He was thirsty. He was in torment. There was no cool breeze or the beauty of plants or chirping of birds, no pleasure or servants to attend to his needs. Every need went unmet. In that story he was aware of the good things he had in his life, but this place of eternal torment was devoid of all those things.

So when we speak of separation from God, we mean separation from His goodness. God will still be present in His wrath. R. C. Sproul writes in his article *What Is Hell?* "A breath of relief is usually heard when someone declares, 'Hell is a symbol for separation from God.' To be separated from God for eternity is no great threat to the impenitent person. The ungodly want nothing more than to be

separated from God. Their problem in hell will not be separation from God; it will be the presence of God that will torment them. In Hell, God will be present in the fullness of His divine wrath. He will be there to exercise His just punishment of the damned. They will know Him as an all-consuming fire."

That person is not finally free of God. He is eternally accountable to Him. He won't know God's kindness or love or grace, only His holy wrath.

The second truth Ascol wants us to be aware of is that hell is a state of association. People were made for God. Hell was made for the devil. Yet people who die in sin will spend eternity in the same place with the demon who is most unlike God.

Third, hell is a state of punishment. Again in Matthew 25:41 it is referred to as fire. Fire in Scripture is a symbol of punishment. Those who deny the existence of hell and its subsequent punishment for sin are either ignorant of the reality of hell or they are attempting to justify their own sinful activity and nature all the while claiming, hoping that God in His love surely wouldn't condemn anyone to such a horrible place. Others may deserve it but not me.

Then in Matthew 25:46 we see the fourth state. Hell is eternal. Think about that for a moment and let it sink in. It is eternal. Timeless. Endless. We sit in a doctor's office or traffic jam for what seems like an eternity.

A child can think that sitting in a suit and tie during a wedding ceremony when he'd rather be outside jumping mud puddles is an eternity.

Eternity is timeless, without end, ongoing. What they are experiencing now is what they will experience forever, without end and without ease.

It doesn't matter how old you are or what sins you committed we have all sinned against a holy and infinite God. We all deserve endless punishment in hell.

There is a reason for hell. It's for those who hate God. Some may think they love God, but Matthew 25 shows us that many who think they love God don't really. They haven't yet looked to Him for eternal life through His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus said He was the only way. So don't bank on being good. It won't get you out of hell. It's not a get out of hell free card. As Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3 "you must be born again." The way to be born again is by believing in Christ to save you, repenting of sin. If not there is retribution in hell.

III. THE RETRIBUTION IN HELL

Make no mistake about it; there is a reason for hell, because hell is a real place, a place of punishment.

We are living in a time when sin doesn't seem to have any consequences. It seems like every sin imaginable is tolerated, acceptable. People are used to sinning. It seems like because sin doesn't have immediate consequences a lot of times that people get the idea there will be no consequences later on. Romans 2:1-6

This says that God's wrath against their sin is being stored up. He's keeping an accurate record of everything and it will all receive His punishment. But in verse 4 there is hope because we read that God's patience is giving the opportunity for repentance. According to II Peter 3:9 God isn't willing for anyone to perish but that all should repent. He is giving everyone time. But it won't last and He will bring retribution. Revelation 14:9-11

Hell is described as a place of torment, conscious pain, wrath, darkness, lasting for eternity with no escape, thirst, loneliness, gnashing of teeth, weeping and wailing and a fiery furnace that never goes out and does not consume its inhabitants. The full weight of their decision to reject Christ will come to bear as they realize their destiny, this existence, their torment, and its timelessness. That is what they will experience forever.

Just as John was unable to capture in adequate terms the beauty of his vision of heaven, so the gospel writers cannot adequately convey the torment of hell itself. The depiction in Scripture of hell is both grim and graphic yet it pales to provide what it will really be like. It will be like nothing we could ever experience or imagine here on earth. Nothing will ever compare to it. There will be eternal retribution.

With all that, what is the response to hell?

IV. THE RESPONSE TO HELL

It essentially boils down to this: there are only two paths, two destinies, two choices. That choice is made in this life, here, now. (I John 5:11-13) You can choose the path of life by having the Son as your Savior or you can choose the path of death which comes by rejecting the Savior. It's your choice to make.

If you have never made that choice or are unsure I would urge you to stay and chat with me or one of the deacons. Eternity is no laughing matter to joke around with. Don't play Russian roulette with your eternal destiny. It's for keeps. Know for sure today. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:13) Hebrews 4:7 "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart."

If you are sure of an eternal destiny in heaven there are two responses required. The first is that every day you should be giving God thanks and praise that He saved you out of a horrible fate. Give thanks for what you have been saved from.

The second is to do everything you can to talk with people about their fate and the reality of hell urging them to trust Christ as their Savior and repent of their sin. You wouldn't drive by a house that was on fire knowing people were inside. You would go and warn them. Hell's utter horror should compel us to do the same for their eternal soul.