

Avoiding Hell-Mark 9:43-50

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please get in touch with Pastor Derek at dberry@calvarybaptistsc.church.]

Take your copy of God's Word and meet me in Mark 9:43...

Everyone has embarrassing family members and embarrassing tendencies. Perhaps you're sitting next to your embarrassing family member this morning. And what do we typically do with our embarrassing family members at public functions? We distance ourselves from them. We don't want to be seen as associated with these individuals lest we, too, be viewed as awkward. For instance, my father used to have a booming laugh in the movie theatres that would cause me to shrink in my seat. Maybe you've heard the phrase, "I can't take y'all nowhere!" Or perhaps it's your own idiosyncrasies that you're embarrassed by, so you ensure that no one else knows about it. I have a couple of those myself. We all have embarrassing family members and quirks that we want undisclosed from others.

Unfortunately, many of us have treated the doctrine of hell as an embarrassing uncle or quirk that we want to keep hidden from the public so we don't have to talk about it. It's a teaching that makes us uncomfortable, and understandably so. Therefore, many preachers and Christians, in general, tend to tuck this doctrine away or avoid it like we do our embarrassing family or tendencies. Well, an expository approach to preaching through the books of the Bible won't allow this type of avoidance. It forces you to deal with the whole council of God's Word instead of just your pastor's favorite topic. This doctrine didn't embarrass Jesus; he discusses it more than all other biblical authors combined! And since Jesus taught this matter of eternal importance, we'll consider it this morning.

1. The Origins of Hell
2. The Horrors of Hell
3. The Necessity of Hell
4. The Avoidability Hell
5. The Warning of Hell

We'll start this morning by considering the origin of this teaching. If you know your Old Testament, you'll know that there aren't any clear and explicit teachings on the doctrine of hell. There are a couple of texts in the prophets that certainly provide this teaching in seed form. So, those who assert that hell is a new teaching of the New Testament don't understand God's progressive revelation. As with many teachings, we see their seed form in the Old Testament and full development in the New. This is why Biblical Theology is so essential.

² 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

²² "For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain. ²³ From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the Lord. ²⁴ "And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh." -Isaiah 66:22-24

So, the idea of hell is clearly present in these texts. But the concept isn't fully developed until the gospels, so I'll take some time to address how Jesus' audience would have understood this concept by their time.

The word translated as hell comes from the Greek *Gehenna*. The Greek word for Hades is also translated as hell in the New Testament, but that involves a slightly different concept that we'll consider later in this message. The word *Gehenna* comes from the Hebrew *Valley of Hinnom*.

This valley was south of Jerusalem, a boundary marker between Judah and Benjamin in the Old Testament. It was in this valley that King Ahaz and Manasseh began sacrificing their children to Molech by burning them on an altar. This was one of the reasons why God judged Israel so harshly. Instead of worshipping the One true God of Israel by observing his laws, they followed the false idols of the nations and even adopted their abominable practices.

Josiah eventually outlawed this practice during his reign as King. However, in the book of Jeremiah, Yahweh, the God of Israel, began to associate this place with his divine wrath and judgment.

³² Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter; for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere. -Jeremiah 7:32

⁶ therefore, behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter. -Jeremiah 19:6

Eventually, this valley became the location where waste and dead bodies were burned. So, this idea of a continual fire became closely associated with the valley of Hinnom, or *Ghenna*, if we're using the Greek. And then comes the intertestamental period. This was the 400-year period of Biblical silence between Malachi and Matthew. And it was during this time that the concept of hell began to develop further. Jewish writings used the term "hell" to describe the fire of the final judgment of the pagan nations and unregenerate Israel. So, Jesus, aware of this term's usage in his day, deploys it to describe the destination of a particular group of people.

Before moving forward, I think it'll be helpful if I explain the distinction between *Hades* and *Gehenna*. Again, both are translated as hell in the New Testament. You have to look into the original language to determine which term is being employed. The concept of Hades, translated from the Old Testament Sheol, is a general term for the realm of the dead. However, the NT usage of the term refers to the temporary place of torment for the unrepentant before the resurrection and final judgment. It's similar to "tissue" and "Kleenex." In other words, Hades is where an unrepentant soul goes directly after death. Whereas Ghenna is the place where the same unrepentant individual, once resurrected and reunited with his body, will spend an eternity in what's also referred to as the lake of fire.

¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the Book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. -Revelation 20:13-15

So technically, no one is in hell yet. However, this text makes it clear that everyone in Hades will be transported into hell at the predetermined time. I hope this helped describe the origins of this teaching. Now, let's transition to the horrors of hell. Consider the metaphoric language that Jesus deploys in this text to describe hell. "The unquenchable fire," "Where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."

There have been several musical artists who have bragged about wanting to go to hell. Biggie Smalls once said,

“When I die, I wanna go to hell, it ain’t hard to tell. It doesn’t make sense, goin’ to heaven with the goodie-goodies dressed in white, I like black Tims and black hoodies. God will probably have me on some real strict [explicit].”

Here’s one I’m sure you’re more familiar with. AC/DC’s “Highway to Hell.”

“No stop signs, speed limit, nobody’s gonna slow me down, like a wheel gonna spin it, Nobody’s gonna mess me around, hey satan, payin’ my dues, playin’ in a rockin’ band, I’m on a highway to hell, don’t stop me.”

Eminem once said, “I’m waitin’ for hell, like hell, I’m anxious as hell.”

You get the picture. Our culture doesn’t take God’s word seriously when considering the horrors of hell. But I promise you, Christopher Wallace and the band members of AC/DC, who’ve passed away, are all terribly regretting their lyrics at this very moment. As will Eminem and any other individual who doesn’t respond to the gospel the way that the Bible demands. But here’s something else interesting about our culture, which I think is the obvious root behind these types of lyrics: people, by and large, don’t believe in hell. Folks will say Biggie Smalls is in heaven, even though his lyrics made it clear he doesn’t want to be there. Any time a celebrity dies, the automatic assumption is that they’re in heaven. This leads me always to ask, “Where did you get the concept of heaven? The same Bible that speaks of heaven also teaches about hell and its horrors.” So, we’ll take some time to consider the horrors of hell. And professing believers, don’t check out. Don’t ignore this warning and think it’s only for those who knowingly reject the gospel. That would be going against what Jesus does in this text because he’s talking to his disciples! So, let’s consider how awful hell is to the best of our abilities. In the 9marks church questions booklet series, Dane Ortlund, author of *Gentle and Lowly*, answers the question: Is Hell Real? I’d recommend that for further study, as I found it to be a good resource. We’ll consider three realities regarding hell.

1. Hell is experienced by the whole person.

A common misconception is that it’s only a person’s spirit or soul that suffers in hell, but this isn’t the case. I alluded to this earlier regarding the difference between Hades and hell. Again, Hades is the temporary place of torment that the souls of the impenitent go to once they die and are separated from their bodies. But the Bible makes clear that there’s coming a day of resurrection at the return of Jesus, where our souls and bodies are reunited. This isn’t merely true for those in Christ but also for those who aren’t.

¹⁵ having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. -Acts 24:15

² 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

These bodies will obviously be different from the ones we have now. They'll be the eternal kind that can experience perpetual destruction. Jesus himself affirms this.

²⁸ And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. -Matthew 10:28

We'll return to this passage later because it teaches us something else about hell.

2. Hell is painful.

Often, our crass references to hell dull us to the dreadful reality of this place. We say things like, "It's hot as hell out here." But as Dane Ortlund has written, "Hell is where no sin is forgiven, where regrets loom large, where our folly and stupidity remain even in our minds, and where God himself judges us with the pain that we deserve." Perhaps no better text speaks to the anguish of hell than Luke 16.

²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' -Luke 16:22-24

3. Hell is eternal.

This removes the idea of Universalism and Annihilationism. Universalism is the idea that, in the end, everyone will be saved. In other words, everyone will be in heaven. Annihilationism teaches that those in hell will cease to exist for eternity. What does the bible say? It speaks of hell as a place of eternal destruction. In other words, the destruction never ceases.

⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might...-2 Thes 1:9

Here in Mark, Jesus calls hell the “unquenchable fire.” And a place “where their worm does not die,” taking the phrase from Isaiah. That sounds so awful that it’s honestly difficult to think about. As Ortlund describes this text, “It’s the image of a destructive worm eating its way through a body, while never actually consuming it; the body is simply perpetually gnawed on in a gruesome eternal torment.”

11 And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.” -Revelation 14:11

We typically don’t have a problem believing the devil will suffer eternal consequences for his rebellion. However, consider this from the text:

10 and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. -Revelation 20:10

41 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels...’ 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” -Matthew 25:41, 46

With all of that said, this may leave you questioning God. Why does such a place like this even exist? And is it a fair punishment for our sins? This leads us to this morning's third point—the Necessity of Hell. We’ll discover from this point that the real scandal of the universe is not that there’s a hell, deserved by all, but that there’s a heaven, offered to all. The truth is that all of humanity deserves hell. That may sound like a shock in a culture where we’re told we are naturally good people. But we’re only viewed as good because we’re making horizontal comparisons. We tend to have a low view of God and a high view of man. This all boils down to understanding the holiness of God. The wages of sin is death because God is ultimately holy! There’s a difference between lying to my kids, wife, job, and the government. The authority of the individual sinned against will determine the punishment. Well, we’ve sinned against the one who holds all authority and whose holiness demands payment for sin!

Isaiah 6 has the seraphim crying out holy, holy, holy! Nowhere else in all the Bible is God-given this kind of threefold repeated refrain. His holiness is his supreme God-ness and utter deity. This is why Isaiah responded by acknowledging his sinfulness! It’s like cleaning a room, thinking it’s spotless, only to discover that the light from outside reveals the filth that remains. And the Bible tells us that we have wicked hearts that have earned us the full wrath of God. And to the point I made the other week, don’t

mistakenly think that hell belongs to the devil. It's not his place of torment. Hell is God's hell because it's where his full wrath is poured. This is why we must understand that it is indeed God that sends people to hell.

I remember watching a video that negated this point. It said God doesn't send people to hell; they send themselves there. This creates a false dichotomy because these two ideas are not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, yes, all who go to hell have no one to blame but themselves for their sin and rejection of the gospel. Through their hardness of heart and refusal to bow their knee to Jesus, they choose hell. C.S. Lewis captured this side of this truth in *The Great Divorce*.

"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. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find."

At the same time, it's clear from Scripture that while the impenitent choose hell, God casts them there. He's sovereign over all, so he's not weak and impotent watching as people are being dragged to hell. No! He's the one casting them there.

⁵ But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! -Luke 12:5

And we have already read Matthew 25. So, God is actively involved in a person's descent into hell. It's where his wrath will be ever-present, and yet the person of Jesus will be absent. This is why Jesus also refers to hell as the place of "outer darkness," contrasted with the new heaven and earth that will need no sun because God himself is the sun. This is all grim news, but it's the truth. And you don't want the doctor who detects cancer early enough to deal with it but, for fear of articulating sad news, keeps it to himself. You want the doctor who discloses the painful news and then follows up with a life-saving treatment or antidote. We now transition to the Avoidability of Hell.

There's one way to avoid hell, and his name is Jesus. It is through the gospel of the Lord Jesus that humanity can escape the horrors of hell. To be clear, hell is not for the worst people. It's the unrepentant person. The gospel teaches that a penitent murderer goes to heaven, and an unrepentant orphanage founder goes to hell. We often think like Arthur from King of Queens or Tom from Tom and Jerry regarding who deserves hell.

To our last point this morning, the Warning of Hell. Take note of what Jesus says in verses 43-48. We know these are hyperboles because the Bible forbids bodily mutilation elsewhere. However, this doesn't diminish the importance of what Jesus

seeks to get across. First, notice he doesn't just say, "Believe in me, and you won't have to worry about hell." This is a warning passage for professing believers. And the warning passages are meant to ensure that we live lives congruent with the Christian faith. If you're not marked by dying to your sin, mortification, then you will go to hell. Here's how Paul the Apostle says it in one of his epistles.

¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. -Romans 8:13

We must be careful not to remove the sting of these warning passages. We can become one-dimensional: "As long as you pray a prayer, you're good!" No! That's not what Jesus says! The warning here is for you, believer. Are you putting to death your sexual sins or the sins of impurity, sensuality, idolatry, gossiping, fits of anger, enmity, strife, jealousy, and divisions? Or are you walking carefree in them? If so, your whole body will be thrown into hell, whether your attendance is perfect on Sundays or not. This is why he mentions removing our hands, feet, and eyes. One commentator said, "Things we value supremely, like eyes, hands, and feet, should not stand in the way of eternal life."

We know evil actions come from a heart that rejoices in sin instead of Christ. Some weeks back, we considered that our primary issue is our hearts. However, we must take desperate outward measures to ensure we're not feeding the flesh as well. I like what Sam Storms says in his work, *Be Killing Sin*.

"Very little, if any, sin comes out of your heart that didn't first enter through your eyes. Our external members are but the instruments we employ to gratify the list that emerges from within. What our Lord was advocating, therefore, [to quote John Stott], was not a literal physical self-maiming but a ruthless moral self-denial. Not mutilation but mortification is the path of holiness he taught."

So believers understand that eternity is on the line regarding our relationship with sin. Verse 49 makes clear everyone will deal with some type of fire. For some, it will be eternal fire; for others, it will be the fire of the trials and persecution of this life, which is what the book of Revelation boils down to. You can either receive the approval of the beast and the wrath of God or the wrath of the beast and approval from God.

Regarding the last verse, the "salt" used in Palestine was derived from deposits around the Dead Sea or from salt pans where the water evaporated, so it wasn't pure sodium chloride. So, the salt could leach out, leaving other minerals like gypsum, literally losing its saltiness. And there was no way of making that substance salty again. So, how do we have salt in ourselves? By being at peace with one another. This goes back to what I

touched on last week. How you treat other believers is a reflection of how you're treating Jesus. Consider this text:

²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. -Matthew 5:22

I know this was a heavy topic; trust me, I know. I felt the weight of it while preparing the message. But the more we grasp the weight of the terror of hell, the more the gospel is made glorious in our eyesight. People typically tone down the wrath of God in hopes of saving the idea of God's love, but they actually destroy both by missing the gospel. The wrath of God is an essential dark backdrop against which we can see the bright, shining beams of the love of God in the gospel of Christ. Let us come to this Christ of the gospel, we who are poor and needy.

Let's pray.