

Lance Morrow wrote a recent Wall Street Journal piece that says, “Pope Francis was asked earlier this year what he thinks about hell. He replied, ‘It’s difficult to imagine it. What I would say is not a dogma of faith, but my personal thought: I like to think hell is empty. I hope it is.’ It was a pastoral pleasantry, kindly meant but a little sloppy theologically. It raised interesting questions: Has the traditional hell, fire and brimstone through all eternity, gone out of business, either because as the pope hopes there are no longer enough customers, or because hell has become medieval, lurid, and not credible to the 21st-century mind? Is eternal fire only a metaphor? If so, what does it mean? Is hell a physical place or a state of mind? ...If God’s verdict goes against you, does that mean a life of everlasting torment? Is it possible to believe in hell if you don’t believe in God, or is hell the terrible solitude of living without God?

If you’ve lived in the real world for any length of time, I know you have heard and perhaps even uttered the words, “Go to hell.” When I overhear someone say that phrase I’m tempted to follow up with a few insolent and snarky comments like, “What do you mean by that? Why should you tell anyone to go there? How do they get there?” Along about then I would probably hear that ugly phrase directed towards me! It’s one of the most unpleasant things one person can say to another. It conveys the desire to have something bad befall that other person—maybe punishment, or discomfort, or even condemnation.

But I doubt that those who tell anyone to go to hell understand the true implications of their suggestion. I have fairly good reason to think that the idea of hell is a joke for most people today, and that includes people who are believers and nonbelievers. We can’t assume that others believe there is such a place, or that they feel anyone might have the authority to send them there.

But Christians cannot ignore the reality of hell. Jesus warns us to “*Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell*” in verse 5 of today’s reading. Kids may especially have a hard time with this. As children, however, many of us have experienced some kind of emotional hell at

recess or on the bus ride home where we were ignored or bullied. For some kids it's the worst time of the day. Describing hell to a young child is terribly challenging, but it can be equally difficult to explain to an adult. Through literature it has been tried, like Dante's *Inferno* which describes hell, its seven rings, and its occupants in great detail. The Faustian legend presents hell as a place inhabited by those who have bartered their souls for earthly rewards.

Perhaps the most insightful book I've ever read about hell is the one by C. S. Lewis called, *The Great Divorce*. Lewis' hell is a grey town, never clear, never raining. The citizens settle and resettle, always farther away from their annoying neighbors. They're excluded from heaven by their own choice and by their inability to admit they were wrong in any way. We have a few biblical descriptions of both heaven and hell. Heaven has pearly gates and streets of gold. But we should take that more as a vivid depiction of our mind's eye. On the other hand, heaven indeed may have pearly gates and streets of gold, but I'm convinced it will offer something far more precious and more lasting.

Hell, on the other hand, is described as a place with a lake of burning fire. In an attempt to convert the Eskimos, 18th century missionaries tried to explain the lake of burning fire concept to them. The Eskimos thought it sounded great and wanted to know how to get there! I tend to believe that the lake of fire represents the fires of our jealousy or rage. Surely hell is that place where, by our own choice, we are consumed with Self, our own appetites and ambitions. As believers, we know that hell is as real a place as heaven. But we don't know where it is. It may be a trillion light years away, or it may be all around us in a dimension we can't see. The temperature of hell, its scenery and architecture, are all matters for conjecture. The Bible doesn't give us much in the way of details about those things. But we know a bit more about admission to it.

On this topic we might want to ask why a loving all-powerful God would permit the existence of hell. One theory is that hell is a place of punishment for evil deeds, where rotten people finally get their due. I prefer to think of it as a place where God ceases to contend with us. If we have resisted God's will and way throughout our lives, God in the end lets us have it our way. Whatever and

wherever hell is, it's a place where God is not, and where darkness rules. It's a place where we are free to have it all our own way with all the other people who want to have it all their own way. Even God cannot force his love on us.

Jesus came, so he tells us over and over again in the Gospels, to establish the Kingdom of God. He did not come merely to teach and heal, though he did do those things. The Kingdom that he spoke of is the rule and reign of God in the world; and it exists here and now. Those who have said yes to Jesus as Lord and Savior are a part of his Kingdom and are committed to extending his reign in the world. If that is so, then there must also be a kingdom in opposition to it, a kingdom of darkness, for those who do not want the rule of God in their lives.

God cannot force his rule and his Kingdom on anyone. God is a gracious God. Those who reject him must congregate someplace where God is not. It is, in a manner of speaking, the kingdom of Self. Self is the commodity, we could say, that the enemy of God deals in. He trades on our self-love and our excessive pride. He asks us, "Why don't you get everything that's coming to you and why not get it now? Take care of your own wants first. You deserve it. Take what you can get, even if you have to use other people to get it!"

Jesus speaks about those who kill the body. He's talking about everything that is temporal, our physical existence in this world, as well as, our time, our money, and our possessions. All of these things will pass away. We are not to worry about those who have the power to kill the body—criminals, thugs, and tyrants. Everything we see and touch will go away one of these days regardless. We aren't going to live in this temporary place forever.

Every time I splurge on a high calorie dessert or sneak a candy bar, I catch myself thinking, "That could kill you!" And yes, it just might. But given enough time, everything will kill us. Life itself is going to kill us. This body, with its comforts and pleasures, is not permanent. Our soul or spirit, our uniqueness or personality, has continuity eternally. What I think Jesus is saying is that those who persuade us to ignore God and completely indulge our self-centeredness and self-interest are the people to stay away from, but not fear.

Perhaps the most alarming truth behind the concept of heaven and hell is that everybody will live forever. Naturally we all die, but when we do, life goes on in some other form. That's the biblical message of the New Testament. The big question is, what kind of life can we anticipate beyond the grave?

In this section of Luke's gospel, Jesus gives warnings and encouragements: "*A crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another.*" Sounds to me like a self-promoting and self-centered bunch. Oddly enough Jesus both frees them from fear and tells them to fear Someone! He tells them to **not be afraid of** "*those who can kill the body and after that can do no more,*" but **I will show you whom you should fear.** "*Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell.*"

At first it doesn't sound like Jesus is freeing us from much of anything! The Lord doesn't reduce our anxieties. People in the 21st century still have a fear of being "thrown into hell." But maybe on a deeper level what we fear is that God would *enjoy* throwing us into hell, or that God is hanging around waiting for us to *mess up*. Maybe you know people who fear that God is waiting for us to mess up, or that all it takes is one mistake for God to be done with us.

It almost seems like Jesus anticipates these fears when he speaks in Luke 12. Because immediately after telling his friends to "fear" the Lord because he has the power to throw them into hell, he tells them that not a single sparrow is forgotten by God, and that "*you are worth more than many sparrows.*"

What exactly does that mean? It means that even though God has the *power* to throw us into hell, he does not have the *desire* to do that. We are worth so much more to God, he values us and loves us so deeply, that God does not desire even one of us to be lost. We may have major fears about not doing enough to "get into" heaven. We may fear that God wants us to mess up and won't forgive us when we do. But Jesus came to set us free from those fears. Jesus reminds us that God desires our good—God desires our salvation. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:3-4, "*God...wants all people to be saved and to come to*

a knowledge of the truth.” He has made a way for our salvation. So, *“Don’t be afraid.”*

Jesus addresses our fears specifically when he reminds us that God cares about the sparrows. They are not spared from death; and neither are we. Nor are we spared from troubles and other misfortunes. Unfair things happen to us all the time, but God knows and cares for us far more than he does the sparrows, and they are by no means *“forgotten by God.”*

Jesus’ saying that I find most frightening here is in verse 2: *“There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed or hidden that will not be made known.”* You may find that terrifying too, but God already knows we are not perfect people. Life in God’s Kingdom means we don’t need to pretend we’re better than we are. Hell is not for bad people, and heaven for good people. Hell may be for people who *think* they are so good, and heaven for those who definitely *know* that they’re not. What I know from the witness of Scripture is that heaven is for those who are willing to repent of sin and to gratefully live in the forgiveness that comes by grace. It is for anyone wanting to live under God’s rule, even though we mess up. Our salvation by grace through faith, can be difficult to grasp, but Bruce Larson tells a story that conveys its meaning in simple terms:

A little boy and his father were playing in the backyard when a bee landed on the boy’s cheek. The lad happened to be allergic to bees, and one sting could result in his death. The father panicked. He didn’t dare intervene or even yell, lest he startle the bee. A second or two later the bee took off, flew around, landed on the father’s arm, and stung him. The father let out a huge sigh of relief and he laughed. He knew that bees have just one sting, and that bee would pose no further threat to his son.

Larson says, “Jesus took the sting out of death through his own death and resurrection.” And he invites us all to be a part of his Kingdom. And he says to every one of us filled with anxiety and fear: *“Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”* Amen.