

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 hear someone say that, I’m tempted to follow up with a few impudent questions. “What do you mean by that? Why should anyone go there? How would they get there? How would we know when we’ve arrived? Who else will be there?” About that time I just might hear that ugly phrase directed towards me! It’s one of the most unpleasant things that one person can say to another. It conveys the desire to have something bad befall the other person—punishment, discomfort, even damnation.

But I doubt that those who tell anyone to go to hell understand the true implications of the suggestion. I have good reason to think that the idea of hell is a joke for most people, both believers and nonbelievers. One cannot assume 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*” (Luke 12:5, NIV). Kids have a very hard time with this. As children, however, a good 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 that can be the very worst time of the day. Describing hell to a young child is definitely challenging, but it can be equally difficult to explain it to an adult. It has been tried through literature, like Dante’s *inferno* that 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.

The most insightful book I’ve read about hell is the one that is 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 are excluded from heaven by their own choice and by their inability to admit they were wrong in any way. We have some biblical descriptions of both heaven and hell. Heaven has pearly gates and streets of gold. We shouldn’t take that too literally, but rather as a vivid depiction for our minds. On the other hand, heaven may very well have pearly gates and streets of gold, but I think 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. The early missionaries tried to explain that concept to the Eskimos, who thought it sounded great and wanted to know how to get there! I tend to believe that the lake of fire represents the fire of jealousy, ambition, 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. We don’t know where it is. It may be a trillion light years from here, or it may be all around us in a dimension we can’t discern. The temperature of hell, its scenery and architecture, are all matters for conjecture. The Bible doesn’t give us details about those things, but we know more about admission to it.

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 will finally get their due. But I prefer to think it is a place where God ceases to contend with us. If we have resisted his will and his way throughout our lives, he finally lets us have it our way. Whatever and wherever hell is, it is a place where God is not, and where darkness rules. It is a place where we are free to have it all our own way with all the other people who want to have it their own way. Even God cannot force his love on us,

Jesus came, so he tells us over and over again in Scripture, to establish the Kingdom of God. He did not come merely to teach and heal, though he did do those things. The Kingdom he spoke of is the rule 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 rule in the world. If that is so, then there must be a kingdom in opposition to that, 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 essence, the kingdom of self, and that's the commodity the enemy of God deals in. He trades on our self-love and our pride. He says, "Why don't you get everything coming to you and get it now? Take care of yourself. If you don't, nobody will. 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. The body is all that is temporal, your physical life, this world, your time, your money, and your possessions. All of those things will pass away. We are not to worry about those who have the power to kill the body. That's going to go away one of these days regardless. We aren't going to live forever.

Every time I eat a rich dessert or a candy bar I say to myself, "That stuff could kill you," and it just might. But given enough time, everything will kill us. Life is going to kill us. The body, with its comforts and pleasures, is temporal. The spirit, our uniqueness, our personality, is eternal. Those who can persuade us to let go and indulge our self-centeredness and self-interest are the people to fear. The really alarming truth behind the concept of heaven and hell is that everybody lives forever. We all die, and when we do, life goes on in some form. That's the biblical message of the New Testament.

The question is, what kind of life can we anticipate beyond the grave?

Jesus gives warnings and encouragements to a gathered crowd of "*many thousands*" in this section of Luke's gospel. Oddly, Jesus both frees them from fear and tells them to have fear! He tells them **not to fear** "*those who can kill the body and after that can do no more,*" but **to fear the One who** "*has authority to throw you into hell.*"

Initially, it doesn't sound like Jesus is freeing us from anything at all! Jesus doesn't reduce our anxieties and people still have a fear of being "thrown into hell." 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*, and all it takes is one mistake for God to be *done* with us. It almost seems like Jesus anticipates that reaction, and immediately addresses that fear. After telling them to fear the Lord because he has the power to throw them into hell, Jesus tells them not a single sparrow is forgotten by God, and that *“you are worth more than many sparrows.”*

What does he mean? I think he means that even though God has the *authority* to throw us into hell, God doesn't have the *desire* to do that. We are of infinite worth to God. God values us and loves us so immeasurably that he does not desire any of us to be lost. We fear that God wants us to mess up and won't forgive us when we do. But Jesus came to set us free from that fear. Jesus reminds us that God desires our good. He 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 problems and 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.”* *“Fear him who...has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.”*

Hell is not for the bad, and heaven for the good. Hell may be for the people who think they are good, and heaven for those who know they're not. But Scripture is crystal clear that heaven is for those willing to repent, to live in the forgiveness that comes by grace. It is for anyone wanting to live under God's rule, even though we fail. Our redemption, or salvation, is a difficult concept to grasp, but Bruce Larson once told a story that portrays its meaning in simple terms:

A little boy and his father were frolicking in the yard when a bee landed on the boy's cheek. The lad happened to be allergic to bees, and one sting could result in death. The father was in a panic. 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 laughed in relief. Bees have just one sting, and that bee would pose no further threat to his son.

Jesus has taken the sting out of death for us through his life, death and resurrection. He invites us to be a part of his Kingdom.

And he says to us all: *“Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”*

Amen.