

Shall We Do Away with Hell?

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Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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Isaiah 65:17-19; 66:22-24

I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

As the new heavens and the new earth,
which I will make,
shall remain before me, says the Lord;
so shall your descendants and your name remain.
From new moon to new moon,
and from sabbath to sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me,
says the Lord.

And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people 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.

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus was in Jerusalem. The end was drawing near. And with heightened intensity he warned of approaching danger. He drew stark contrasts between those who are ready, watchful, faithful and those who are not, for whom there waits a place of weeping and of gnashing teeth. Then there's this.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered together before him, and he will separate them from one another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep at his right, but the goats at his left.

Then the king will say to the ones at his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom that has been prepared for you from the world's foundation. Because I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you welcomed me; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you looked after me; I was in prison, and you came to me." Then the righteous ones will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry, and we fed you? Or thirsty, and we gave you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger, and we welcomed you? Or naked, and we clothed you? When did we see you sick or in prison, and we came to you?" In answer, the king will say to them, "I tell you the truth, as much as you did for one of the least of these who are my family, you did for me."

Then he will say to the ones at his left, "Go away from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels. Because I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me; naked, and you did not clothe me; sick and in prison, and you did not look after me." Then they will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and we

did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “I tell you the truth, as much as you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.” These ones will go off into eternal punishment, but the righteous ones into eternal life.

Children’s Story

This is one of my favorite books. It’s by Charles Dickens. It’s called Great Expectations. It’s about a boy named Pip and a girl named Estella. I hope you read it some day.

When Charles Dickens first wrote Great Expectations, it had an unhappy ending. One of his friends told him he ought to change that ending. And he did. He wrote a new ending for the book.

Not a happy ending. But not an unhappy ending either. Dickens gave his book an *almost* happy ending. And it’s a good one.

Usually when a writer writes a story, it ends the way it ends. And we’re stuck with that ending. No one gets to change it – whether it’s a happy ending or an unhappy one.

I wonder, though, if there are some stories maybe where we can change the ending. I especially wonder that about the story that God writes in the Bible.

The Bible does not have a happy ending. But it doesn’t have an unhappy ending either. It has an *almost* happy ending, I suppose. For some people the story God writes in the Bible ends well, but for other people that story ends badly.

What I wonder is this: Is there anything we can do to change how that story ends? You wouldn’t think so, would you? After all the Bible is an old, old book. You can’t go changing how the Bible ends. Unless, of course, God wrote the story that way, leaving room for different endings. I wonder.

Sermon

Certain biblical passages plant indelible images in our minds. Some of those images are charming. There’s Jesus welcoming the little children, for instance. We sing about that one.

*Jesus loves me, this I know,
as he loved so long ago,
taking children on his knee,
saying let them come to me.*

And there’s the image of the new creation, the peaceable kingdom. A new heaven and earth? That’s cosmic. The wolf living with the lamb? The lion eating straw like the ox? A little child leading them? That’s delightful.

But not every biblical image is that way. Some biblical images are disturbing. There are images we would prefer never to see, images we would like to clear from our minds, images we certainly don’t want to carry around with us. One of those images looks like this. Picture new heavens and a new earth. If that’s too abstract, then picture the consummate city. Call it Jerusalem, and fill it with delighted citizens. Then picture a lazy Sunday afternoon stroll outside the city walls to Lookout Point for the best view of God’s enemies, now become burning bushes – always on fire, never burned up! That’s the final image in the book of Isaiah.

It’s not like those old Israelites hadn’t seen this sort of thing before. There were the plagues in Egypt, especially the plague of the firstborn. Passover was of such significance because the Israelites were saved in a setting of so much death and misery. And there was that episode when the earth opened up and swallowed Korah and his party alive. And fire from the Lord licked up the rebels. Then there were the sacrifices of their own children to Molech. In the Valley of Hinnom, they offered their children to be burned, because the gods had to be appeased – gods who were no gods at all! And, of course, those old Israelites knew war and its slaughter up close. They knew siege and defeat and exile. And they knew what it was like to have a taste for vengeance. They wanted to see babies snatched from their mothers –

enemy babies! – and smashed against solid rock. From there it's only a short trip to Lookout Point to watch with pleasure as your enemies burn and burn.

But somehow this vengeful streak became biblical expectation: a fire that does not go out. Jesus says this fire was “prepared for the devil and his angels.” That’s okay with us. We have no use for the devil. He’s been a liar and a murderer from the beginning. Lying is the devil’s native language. Death is the devil’s closest companion. The devil has been nothing but trouble. No good has ever come from the devil. The devil deserves as bad as the devil gets. As for the devil’s angels, who are we to discriminate? Let them suffer right along with their master. The fire was prepared for them.

But apparently this fire that never goes out is not just for the devil and his angels. One of my colleagues in the ministry in the Christian Reformed Church not too long ago assured me that my parents are either in the fire or on their way to the fire, because they died outside the faith. Well, my mom said some of the right things, so maybe she’s okay. But my dad? He’s toast. I can’t tell you how much I appreciated hearing that, and with such certainty, from my colleague. Of course, we’ve always been told that lots of people, if not most people, are destined to burn forever.

Speaking of indelible images, do you remember seeing people jumping from the World Trade Center towers on September 11 seven years ago? They jumped a thousand feet or more. They jumped to certain death. Anything to get away from the fire! Anything rather than burn in that towering hell!

John Calvin suggested that the fire of hell is just a metaphor. That’s a relief. And Calvin knew about fire. They burned people at the stake in his day. But actually there’s no relief at all from Calvin. He says the metaphor of fire is used because the terror of hell is beyond imagining, beyond description. It’s much, much worse than burning forever.

And this is a feature of the new creation? Of the new heaven and earth? Perhaps it’s not a feature, but it is apparently in the neighborhood – or close by: just outside city limits, like a city dump, like a sewage treatment plant, like a trailer park. It’s a rule of urban design: You never put your lake of fire inside city limits!

Let’s assume for a moment that by God’s grace we ourselves are spared the fire. Could we endure the torment of others? Even if they are enemies, we’ve been told to love them. And aren’t they all people made in the image of God? Could we endure the torment of others, especially when we know we’ve been spared only by some fluke of divine grace? Our souls are twisted, too. We are not innocent of sin, even grievous sin. And if it’s only by faith in Jesus that we’re spared . . . Well, we know how shoddy and unsteady our faith is, don’t we? It’s not without reason that the story of the sheep and the goats strikes fear into us.

So, can’t we just get rid of the fire? Can’t we just get rid of hell? After all, isn’t hell an embarrassment these days? Like crazy Aunt Sadie? We remember her, but we don’t talk much about her. And we sure hope she doesn’t come for a visit. Isn’t hell a joke these days? Hell is a town in Michigan, right? Actually, hell is a pizza chain in New Zealand. Hell Pizza. And last month they bought the soul of Walter Scott for \$3800. He was auctioning his soul on-line, and they were buying. Now his soul is in hell – Hell Pizza, that is. (They do have the ovens.) His soul is in Hell, proudly displayed, as a certificate, on a wall at company headquarters in Auckland.

Now, think about it. If you were designing a new creation, if you were building a new creation, would you install a hell anywhere? A swimming pool, yes; but a hell? Especially when there’s always the risk that the punishment you plan, that the misery you plan for someone else will come back on you?

And here’s another thing. How much joy do you suppose there could be in the holy city when, every time you open your windows, you hear screams of agony? And worse yet, when you recognize some of the voices doing the screaming? Maybe your neighbor. Maybe a close friend. Maybe your dad. Maybe your own daughter.

Can't we just get rid of the fire? Can't we just get rid of hell?

The problem is with Jesus. Jesus usually gets us out of these dilemmas, but not this time. It's Jesus who talks about hell more than everyone else in the Bible put together. So there's no getting rid of hell.

Now Jesus doesn't say much about hell in terms of details. And Calvin was right. The fire of hell is a metaphor. All the language about hell is metaphorical. Just as all the language about new creation is metaphorical. What's in store – both on the plus side, with heaven or the new creation, and on the negative side, with hell – what's in store is beyond description, beyond conception, beyond imagination. Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, mind has not conceived both the up-side and the down-side of what's coming.

But apparently God will, in the end, put everything right. This is an important point. The stories and images about hell and punishment are about justice. Justice. God will not fail to respond to sin and injustice in the world. God will not let the status quo of injustice endure. Nor will he let it go unaccounted for. In the end, the demands of justice will be satisfied. That's the point with hell. Of course, let's not forget, in all our figuring of this, to take into account the cross of Jesus Christ. Do we know how many of the demands of justice may already have been satisfied there, on the cross?

Which brings up a critical feature in the stories about hell. The standard of justice in those stories is always surprising. Both the sheep and the goats are surprised at the accounting. So Israel was surprised at the inclusion of Gentiles among the people of God. And so the church will be surprised as well. Did you notice that in the story of the sheep and the goats, there is nothing about faith in Jesus? That's a surprise. But of course, the prophet Isaiah had already warned (see ch. 58, for example) that the busily and faithfully religious would be in for a surprise. That all their religion was not what God was after. That all that religion was no slam-dunk when it came to salvation.

So, no, we can't get rid of hell, mostly because Jesus hangs on to it. But we have to admit, we know very little about hell. Much less than literary and artistic imaginations over the centuries have led us to believe.

Yet we do know this. Jesus holds out hell as a scary future prospect. It's not the sort of place you would ever want to live next to. And it's not the sort of place you would ever want to live – living forever and dying forever.

So, be scared by hell, at least a little bit. Be scared enough of hell to take seriously your religion and your life. Be scared enough of hell to take seriously whom you are trusting and whom you are serving. Be scared enough of hell to take seriously the exalted and holy God. And be scared enough of hell to take seriously your lowly friend or neighbor or even a humble stranger in need. Because you never know where Jesus will be. And in every "heaven or hell" equation, Jesus is, one way or another, the primary factor.