

WHY BELIEVE IN HELL?, MT.13:36-44

Why: Questions for Christians #15

◆**Intro:** A friend encouraged author Neil Cole to tour the Rodin museum while in France. Reflecting on Rodin's most famous work, Cole writes, "Rodin was a French impressionist sculptor. Though many do not realize his name, most are familiar with his work. He created the Thinker. What you may not realize is that the Thinker was really a study he had done to sit on the top of his greatest masterpiece—*The Gates of Hell*. For years we have been wondering what it is that the Thinker is thinking about. No, he's not wondering about where he left his clothes the night before. What the Thinker is contemplating is an eternity of judgment separated from God."



◆Cole goes on to describe *The Gates of Hell*, which depicts innumerable beings writhing in agony on their way to judgment.



As the vision of the work gripped Cole's friend, she said, "Oh, I could just stare at *The Gates of Hell* forever." It was quiet for a moment as the significance of her words became clear. Cole writes, "All I could think of to say at that moment

was, 'Oh, I hope not.'"

◆Barna reports that 76% believe that Heaven exists, while nearly the same proportion said that there is such a thing as Hell (71%). Most Americans do not, however, expect to experience Hell first-hand: just one-half of 1% expect to go to Hell upon their death. Nearly two-thirds of Americans (64%) believe they will go to Heaven. For every American who believes he's going to

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Hell, there are 120 who think they're going to Heaven. Today we're going to ask the questions: "Is there really such a thing as hell?" "If so, what is hell like?" and "Why is hell necessary?"

◆ **1. Is there really such a thing as hell?** People generally don't want to believe in the existence of Hell, and that is not hard to understand. CS Lewis put it. "There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of scripture, specially of our lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason." There are variations on the theme that attempt to get around Hell.

◆ **A. Universalism: universalism takes the hell out of forever by postulating that eventually all men will arrive safely in heaven.** No matter who you are, where you're from, what you believe – eventually all dogs go to heaven because that's what God is supposed to do, according to universalism. Universalists like verses like:

◆ *"Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men."*
Romans 5:18, NIV.

◆ However, it is poor interpretation to read Paul as a universalist. The word "all" cannot refer to "each person without exception". Paul's other writings do not permit this. Often "all" refers to all kinds of people without distinction: as in Medes, Persians, Jews,

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Romans. It could also be a generalization. For example, "all Judea went out to hear John the Baptist." Does that mean not a single human stayed home to watch the dinner on the stove? Of course we don't read it literally like that. How about this next one?

◆ "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." 1 Corinthians 15:22, NIV.

◆ The universalist reads this to say that just as everyone gets sin from Adam, everyone gets salvation from Jesus. But this is also Paul writing, and we know from the rest of his writing, as well as the rest of scripture, that everyone is not saved. The operative phrase is "in Adam", and "in Christ" -everyone in Adam (that would be all human descendants) dies because of sin. Everyone in Christ (that would be all believers, Christ's children) lives because of Jesus. The very next verse affirms this truth:

◆ "But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him." 1 Corinthians 15:23, NIV.

◆ Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament teach that all people are saved. We'll see more in a minute. Another attempt to get around the concept of Hell is...

◆ **B.** Annihilation: Annihilation takes the forever out of hell by figuring that God may judge the unbeliever, but then he will graciously destroy him or her, and they will cease to exist at all.

Many folks are fine with Heaven being eternal. But hell? We'll that just doesn't sound so nice or fair. (We might remind

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ourselves that any Heaven at all is completely unfair. All have sinned (Rom3:23). The wages of sin is death (Rom.6:23). Strict fairness would put us all in John Lennon's view "imagine there's no heaven." The Gospel comes in the second half of v23: *but the free gift of God is eternal life!* Listen friends, we worship God not because he's fair. Gifts aren't fair. We worship him because he's good, and giving. Heaven is a gift. You can't earn it. Jesus' death was my gift! Lets not bother with the whole "fairness" thing.) Still if you don't want to believe in eternal wrath against evil, then you opt for annihilation. However, the witness of scripture is that Hell is equally as durable as Heaven.

◆ *"Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.*

"Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever." Daniel 12:2-3, NIV. (Daniel wrote this around 586BC)

◆ *"Then [the wicked] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."* Matthew 25:46, NIV. (Jesus said this around 30 AD)

◆ The term "eternal" is used of both heaven and hell. If hell is not eternal, then we must also reject heaven as eternal. Yet few are excited about doing that!

◆ **C.** Is there really such a thing as hell (or heaven for that matter)? Ultimately it is the authority of Jesus, and the reliability of the biblical text that tells us of hell. The whole of Scripture, 66

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books, 40 different authors, teaches the reality of Hell. Jesus himself, the one Resurrected One, the Son of God, whose life alone altered the world more than anyone else –he talks more about hell than anyone else.

◆*“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out--those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. (John 5:28,29, NIV).*

◆*“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Matthew 10:28, NIV.*

◆We’ve already seen in this series the reliability of the biblical text. We’ve already seen the reasonable authority of the risen Christ. It is that Christ, and that text that tells us about the reality of hell.

◆**2. What exactly is the scriptural hell like?** The New Testament uses all the terms Hades, Gehenna, eternal fire. Hades is the Greek concept of the underworld where evil lives on. Gehenna refers to the garbage dump outside Jerusalem, or the Valley of Hinnon. A constant fire was kept burning there. These pictures are used to depict the eternal separation from God and all goodness, of those who chose their own way over God.

◆**A.** While we often speak in terms of fire, high temperature, lack of water, etc. Hell’s misery is both a physical and a spiritual experience. As you well know, misery and suffering are greater

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realities than mere physical circumstances. A man can be physically deprived, beaten and **starved** and still happily pray for his captors, and in fact many Christians have done just that. A woman can own an entire **island** and still think her life a living hell because there is no love in her marriage. Misery has to do with much more than things. We don't need to assume that there is nothing but four bare walls and a room in hell, or that everyone is happily unaware of reality and knows nothing substantial. *The afterlife is a place of **consciousness*** as Jesus makes clear in the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus (Lk.16) One might possess physical beauty but lack the capacity to see or enjoy it, just as an addict in the woods thinks nothing of the crystal rivers, or the pine aroma, and wants nothing more than to leave. God is the source of all good. Since hell is the separation from the good presence of God, hell must also be the **absence** of good, or at least the absence of any sense of it. Therefore, in Hell you lose community and friendship even if there are others around. There will be moral awareness, for scripture says every knee will bow to Jesus whether in heaven or hell. But it will only serve to highlight the utter tragedy of both being there and deserving it.

◆ **B.** I think Hell is best described as a place devoid of all satisfaction.

◆ That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil--this is the gift of God. (Ec 3:13)

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◆ There may be plenty of activity, but if there is, there will be no joy there. There may be plenty of food, but there will be no joy in eating it, something like when you are ill and everything tastes pretty much the same. In the end God will give us exactly what we wanted: ourselves without himself.

◆ The pirate **Barbosa**, captain of the Black Pearl in *Pirates of the Caribbean* describes hell well. He and his crew are cursed by the treasure of Cortez. They cannot feel, they cannot taste, they eat and are never filled. They kill and pillage and steal but there is no happiness in their treasure. It is a chore to take it. Death would be a welcome help, but they cannot die either. Since joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit of God (Galatians 5), and since Hell is the absence of God, they we are fools who think that Hell will be an acceptable option.

◆ **3. Is the existence of Hell reasonable?** People in the morally relative culture of America readily judge truth by their feelings. Hell “doesn’t seem fair”, or “I can’t conceive of a loving God punishing people.” [Which also explains why so many parents today fail to be the parents; they act like the god they would want. They think discipline, or punishment is negative, so they avoid it and try to reason with a 4 year old in the grocery aisle. (Listen closely, toddler must never win over the parent. That will produce law-breaking citizens.) Others think that they mustn’t *make* their son attend worship with them because it must be his choice. Why? Do you let him choose whether to play with

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guns or not? Whether to go to school or not? You feed him. You cloth him. You insure him. You pay for his doctor bills. You own the house. Does he want to eat? Then he follows your directions for good health. He can choose, but when he is responsible for himself. While you're responsible, YOU teach him how to choose.]

◆ Love is most certainly compatible with discipline. In reality love has teeth, and love is intelligent. Foolishness lets a child decide things for himself, and the lack of justice is a weak sort of love, if it is love at all. Love seeks the good of the beloved. That means it always sets it's face against all evil and that is exactly what hell is; God setting him face firmly and eternally against all evil.

◆ **A.** We don't think much of hell because we don't think much of sin and evil. Jonathan Edwards, the great theologian and preacher of early America, said the reason we find hell so offensive is because we do not find sin so offensive. We are like children on a bus. A boy calls a girl **ugly**. The slanderer feels nothing. But an adult knows much more about life. (The adult knows that the girl may be questioning her worth. She may be ignored by her friends. She may be unloved by her parents. She may constantly compare herself to her older, seemingly prettier sister. She may often cry while looking at herself in the mirror.) The adult knows *because* he/she has lived all of that by now. We are the children who think sin is not really a big deal. God is our

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parent who knows how big it really is, and what it really does in the grand scheme of things.

◆**B.** The reality of hell actually affirms the magnitude of the cross and the size of God's love! Knowing what we are saved from (eternal wrath and punishment) shows how undeserved and graciously loving is the promise of a heaven absent of every weed! There is nothing hopeful about an afterlife with all the same mix as this one! TS Eliot: "I had far rather walk, as I do, in daily terror of eternity, than feel that this was only a children's game in which all the contestants would get equally worthless prizes in the end." To throw out Hell or punishment is to throw out any sense of evil, but also any hope of real good!

◆**C.** And yet none of us can do that, can we? Everyone wants hope of good. Everyone knows the frustration of injustice when it is against THEM. The Buddhist concept of **karma** (that which goes around, comes around; good and bad always get balanced) reveals that people of all religions share the desire for justice. Even **thieves** are disturbed when someone steals from *them!* We all know instinctively the principle of hell: that love must win and evil must be stopped, and stopped for good (eternal stopping).

◆**Conclusion:** In Rodin's sculpture, the Thinker is contemplating "an eternity of judgment separated from God." Perhaps he is realizing that Earth leads directly into Heaven or directly into Hell, affording a choice between the two. The best of life on Earth is only a glimpse of Heaven; the worst of life is but a glimpse of

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Hell. For Christians, this present life is the closest they will ever come to hell. For unbelievers, it is the closest they will ever come to Heaven. Which trajectory are you on?

◆ Did you know that our default is to choose hell? All of humanity is born in sin, fine with it, and headed where it leads. That's our default state!

◆ *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."* John 3:36, NIV.

◆ But listen, just as real as hell is, so real is heaven! And God is constantly offering you heaven. That's what Jesus' death paid for! And how good is a God who would tell you, warn you, even let his Son die for you, to keep you from driving off the cliff you're headed for?

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Communion readings: Ezekiel 33:10-17, Rom 7:21-25

Discussion readings and questions:

Matthew 25:31-46

When did God plan out heaven for believers? Why are the goats surprised? Why are the sheep surprised?

Luke 16: 19-31

What human abilities do you see continuing in Hell?

Why doesn't the rich man have a name?

What is the point of the parable? What is it that convinces you of the reality of heaven or hell?

Matt 22:29-32

What's hopeful here? Where does Jesus base his teachings about the afterlife? Put your family names in the text. What does that make you feel?

Romans 2:1-4; 3:9-20

Who do we have more in common with? Jesus, or criminals?

Where are we headed by default? Why? What danger are we being warned against?

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Romans 1:18-32

Find how many times it says God "gave them over". What does this mean? Since God "gives us over" when we persist in sin, what does that tell you about what Hell includes? About how we get there? What does this text say about the opportunities we've had to escape wrath?

Children's message:

1. Show the **Thinker**. What do you think he's thinking about.? Where did I leave my tennis shoes? How come they don't let 5 year old drive a car? Why don't our knees bend the other way? How did keep off the grass signs get there?

The man who made the thinker says he's thinking about hell and heaven. See, **everything dies**. See this wilted **flower**? Is it alive? See this brown **grass**? What do you know about it? People die too except mostly after we get real old!

The Bible says that people are like grass and flowers fall and wither, but the love of god endures forever! Ps.103:15-17

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2. Do you know why things die? **Because people sin**, do bad things. That's why everything dies. A day is coming when god will put all the bad thing in one place forever. **Hell.**

3. Since you and I all do bad things sometime, after we die we go to another world where all the bad stuff goes. But guess what! There is another world where god is and there nothing bad is, everything good is, and nothing ever dies! **Heaven. If we are sorry for our bad, Jesus will forgive us and take us to heaven.**