

INTRODUCTION

One of the subjects that has been suggested for me to tackle in a series of sermons on difficult and controversial issues is the question: is there a hell and, if it does exist, what is it like? And can we ever conceive of a God of all love condemning people to suffer in hell for all eternity?

Well, there most certainly is a hell. It's called IKEA - without an exit, so you're condemned forever to go round and round trying to figure out how to say all those unpronounceable names!

Seriously though, ours is a generation that seeks to avoid facing up to the issue. Not so in previous ages. The church was not above trying to terrify its members with threats of eternal punishment and the torments of hell if they did not behave as the church told them. Today we might feel it somewhat underhand and manipulative to use the threat of hell as a means of social control. Nevertheless, walls of churches in the middle ages were often covered with what are called doom paintings, reminding those who saw them of what awaited them if they remained stubbornly disobedient to the church's teaching. Here is a lurid detail from one such doom painting, depicting demons in hell subjecting guilty sinners to everlasting torment.



Later, in the 18th century, one of the leaders of the Great Awakening in America, Jonathan Edwards, preached a sermon entitled '*Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God*'. It's a pity that Jonathan Edwards is known for that one sermon, because he was also a leading philosopher and theologian in his day, and there is so much more to him than just this.

Today, in contrast to Jonathan Edwards and others of former generations, we tend to emphasise the loving justice of God rather than his angry justice. So our starting point is different from that of our ancestors. Even so, when I came to prepare this morning's sermon I was struck by how much Biblical material there is on the subject. I was almost at a loss as to which passages to choose as our readings. I will refer to those that have been read, but I want to add a few more as well. And I will try to be as simple and as succinct as possible.

I have a number of convictions that I want to share with you this morning. The first of them is the conviction that

GOD DESIRES THE SALVATION OF ALL

God does not actually want anyone to go to hell. He passionately wants us to enjoy a relationship with himself that lasts forever. 1 Timothy 2:4 says that God wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. Again, in Deuteronomy 30, the choice God puts before his people is one of life or death, blessing or curse, of loving him and walking in his ways or rejecting him and following after other gods. But there is no doubt as to which of the alternatives God wants his people to choose. His fervent appeal is, *Choose life!* This also comes over very clearly in the Old Testament reading from Ezekiel. God takes no pleasure in the punishment of a sinner. He would much rather they turn to him and live.

Actually, that 18th chapter of Ezekiel displays a great advance in Old Testament thinking about the justice of God and how people stand in relationship to him. There are stories in the Old Testament of whole clans of people being punished for the sin of just one member. For instance, after the victory of Jericho under the leadership of Joshua the Israelites were defeated at the town of Ai. The reason for that defeat, seen as a sign of God's displeasure, was eventually attributed to a man named Achan who had greedily kept some of the booty from Jericho for his own use instead of devoting it to God. When he was found out, his whole family was stoned to death.

Everything in us would want to protest at such an outcome. It doesn't seem fair that some people should be punished for what others have done. But it was not until the time of Ezekiel that a doctrine of individual responsibility was formed. Each one of us suffers for our own sin, not for the sins of others. As Ezekiel puts it earlier in chapter 18, *It is the soul that sins that will die*. But, as Scripture testifies, that is not what God wants to happen.

This brings us to my second conviction, which is that

GOD GIVES US FREEDOM TO ACCEPT OR REJECT HIS WAY

Not only in Ezekiel and Deuteronomy, but throughout its whole length the Bible presents us with a choice. Jesus said that there are two ways, a broad and easy one that leads to destruction and a narrow one that is hard and difficult, which yet leads to life.

Again, in John 3 we read that the choice is between light and darkness. It says that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Light has come into the world through Christ, but people loved darkness rather than the light. And so they condemn themselves because they do not believe in him.

God's will and good pleasure is that we should choose the way that leads to life and light. But he will never force us to take that way. If God compelled us to love and serve him, our love and service would be of no value because it would not have been freely given. His relationship with us, and ours to him, would also be less than fully personal.

But if we can freely choose God, then we can also freely choose another way, *and God will not stop us*. The divine gift of freedom to human beings is a very risky one for God. The reason for saying that is, of course, that human beings are capable of great good as well as great evil.

But freedom is a risky thing for us, too. Which leads to the third conviction that I would like to share with you this morning.

GOD IS A GOD OF JUSTICE

At every moment of our lives we have freedom to choose – for God or against God. But we also have to live with the results of those choices we make. The universe that God has made is a moral one. Our decisions, actions and behaviour have consequences, for good or ill.

Wrong human choices have, for millions of people, created a hell on earth. We live today with the consequences of what we and others have decided to do by choosing the darkness over the light. In one sense, the answer to the question 'Is there a hell?' is 'Yes, it exists already on earth!' Hell is the woman in Eastern Congo who has endured multiple rape and genital mutilation. Hell is the prison cell where opponents of the Iranian regime have been subjected to torture. Hell is genocide, be it in the Nazi gas chambers, Bosnia, Rwanda, or wherever. Hell is staring starvation in the face because there has been no rain. Hell is an oil spillage in the Mexican Gulf and the destruction of both life and livelihoods. And so it goes on and on and on. And it is all down to the tragic, selfish misuse of human freedom.

In the Psalms the wicked who plan to do bad things to the righteous are often said to be caught out by their own decisions. For instance, Psalm 7 says *The one who digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit he has made. The trouble he causes recoils on himself; his violence comes down on his own head.*

However, there is often a mismatch between action and consequence. More often than not it is not the wicked who fall into the pit they have dug, as the Psalms suggest, but the good people they are persecuting. The good suffer, while the wicked seem to get away with it. If justice is confined to this world alone, then many get a raw deal. Ultimate justice therefore has to belong to the next world. But before we consider that, there is a final conviction I have to share with you. It is that

GOD HAS SUFFERED HELL ON OUR BEHALF

God's very own Son Jesus Christ experienced hell when he died for us on the cross. It was there, according to the testimony of the Gospels, that he cried out, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

That cry of dereliction reveals the true nature of hell. Hell does not consist of the lurid scenes of torture we see in medieval doom paintings. Hell is not fire and brimstone. Yes, the Bible does talk about fiery coals and burning sulphur, about lakes of fire that are never quenched and worms that never die, but such descriptions are figurative and imaginative. They are not meant to be taken literally. The pain is not physical, but spiritual. Hell is what Jesus experienced at Calvary - the pain of exclusion from the presence of a totally loving God. Hell is to experience eternal isolation, to be completely and finally cut off from loving relationships with God, from other people and from one's own true nature. Hell is utter lostness and alienation. And, yes, it will be the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, as Jesus says.

And it's what Jesus endured for us when he died. And he endured it so that none of us may need to endure it, but may be reconciled to God and restored to a relationship with him that never ends. And that happens when we trust him and take the step of faith into the eternal life that he offers.

It is an article of Christian belief that between the time of his death on the cross on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter Sunday Jesus descended to the realm of the dead to rescue the lost souls in prison. It is known as the harrowing of hell. Death is destroyed, evil is defeated, hell is overcome. And in his return to life Jesus leads with him in triumphant procession those he has redeemed from sin and death. So mercy triumphs over wrath. Grace trumps judgement.

CONCLUSION

So is there a hell? Yes there is. It has to exist as the final guarantee of human freedom. The God who is all love desires the salvation of every person who has ever lived. But he will not force anyone to love and serve him, even though resistance to his love may endure forever. He only ever seeks to persuade. So maybe God in the end may have to accept that there will be some who will never capitulate to his offer of grace and love; that there will be some people who by their own choice and decision persist in saying *No* to God, and so forever exclude themselves from the bliss of life with God.

But can God's love ever be defeated by human intransigence? If it can be, then how can we say that in the end love will reign over the universe? Or, in the end will all surrender and so be saved? I don't know. Hell exists as a possibility, but whether anyone ever ends up there remains an open question.

Ultimately, hell is a personal matter. We can't be complacent about it. In our Gospel reading Jesus suggested that some who thought they might end up in heaven actually end up in hell. So it's up to us, to you and me. It's our choice, and God will not stop us from making it, though he will suffer infinite pain and loss if we do. But why should we choose that way when choosing God's way promises infinitely more?

So I finish, firstly with God's appeal through Ezekiel: *'Repent! Turn away from all your offences. Get a new heart and a new spirit Why will you die? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!* And secondly, Paul's appeal to the Corinthians, *We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. For I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.* As a banner that has appeared on the outside wall of this church says, *Choose life! Choose God!* May God grant that we will all so choose. Amen.

(If anyone would like to receive prayer ministry after the service, please remain seated and someone will come and join you as soon as possible.)