

Our Spiritual Reality: Grappling with Hell

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

Heaven and Hell 545

Some people cherish the notion that God turns His face away from people, spurns them, and casts them into hell, and is angry against them because of their evil. Some people even go so far as to think that God punishes people and does them harm. They support this notion from the literal meaning of the word where things like this are said, not realizing that the spiritual meaning of the Word, which makes sense of the letter, is wholly different. So the real doctrine of the church, which is from the spiritual meaning of the Word, teaches something else. It teaches that the Lord never turns His face away from anyone or spurns anyone, never casts anyone into hell or is angry.

Isaiah 5:14, 20-24 (Kempton Translation, modified)

¹⁴ Therefore hell enlarged its soul, and opened up its mouth without statute; its honor, and its crowd, and its uproar, and they who triumph, shall go down into it.
²⁰ Woe unto those who say for evil good, and for good evil; setting darkness for light, and light for darkness; setting bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! ²¹ Woe unto the wise in their own eyes, and intelligent before their own faces! ²² Woe to heroes at drinking wine, and men of valor at mingling strong drink, ²³ who justify the wicked because of a bribe, and remove the justice of the just from him! ²⁴ Therefore as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and the flame slackens the chaff, so shall their root be as decay, and their blossom shall go up as the powder; for they have rejected the law of Jehovah of Armies, and disdained the saying of the Holy One of Israel.

Revelation 20:11-15 (Kempton Translation, modified)

¹¹ And I saw a great white throne, and Him who sat upon it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God; and the books were opened, and another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and hell gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged each according to their works. ¹⁴ And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. ¹⁵ And if anyone was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire.

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Every evil carries its punishment with it, the evil and the punishment being connected; therefore whoever is in evil is also in the punishment of evil. And yet no one in the other world suffers punishment on account of the evils that they had done in this world, but only on account of the evils that they then do; although it amounts to the same and is the same thing whether it be said that they suffer punishment on account of their evils in the world or that they suffer punishment on account of the evils they do in the other life, since everyone after death returns into their own life and thus into the same kinds of evil; and the person continues the same as they had been in the life of the body....

But good spirits, although they had done evils in the world, are never punished, because their evils do not return. Moreover, it is granted to know that the evils they did were of a different kind or nature, not being done purposely in opposition to the truth, or from any other badness of heart than that which they received by inheritance from their parents, and that they were borne into this by a blind delight when they were in externals separate from internals.

Introduction

- Have you heard of a “fire and brimstone” sermon?
 - It means a kind of sermon which was more common in the past in which the preacher talks about hell and damnation and tries to scare people and convince them to repent and do the right thing.
- The talk today is going to have some fire and brimstone in it.
 - Because some of the stories in the Lord’s Word have fire and brimstone in them and people have some pretty confused ideas about them and it’s important that we understand what the Lord is revealing to us in those stories.
- We’ve been doing a series of talks on our spiritual reality.
 - Last time we talked about heaven.
 - And it would be nice if we could just talk about heaven.
 - But that would not give us a *full* picture or an *accurate* picture of reality.
 - We also need to talk about the hard stuff; we also need to talk about and think about hell.
 - And that means talking about fire and brimstone, and eternal punishment, and some of the saddest and hardest things about reality.

The First Fire and Brimstone Story

- There’s a story from the Lord’s Word that can help us to approach this hard topic in a useful way.
 - It’s actually the first time that fire and brimstone are mentioned in the Lord’s Word: the story of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.
 - In the literal sense of that story from Genesis, it says that the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah had become great and their sin had become very heavy (18:20).
 - And so it says that Jehovah made it rain brimstone and fire on those cities (Genesis 19:24) and destroyed them.
 - And this is often the way these sorts of stories are told in the literal sense: God punishes people for doing evil with fire.
- But the part I want to focus on happens the day before the brimstone and fire come raining down.
 - Jehovah had revealed to Abraham what He was about to do to Sodom and Gomorrah and then Abraham approached to ask a question: he said,
 - ²³ “Will You also consume the just people with the wicked? ²⁴ Perhaps there be fifty just people in the midst of the city; will You also consume and not

spare the place for the sake of the fifty just people who are in the midst of her? ²⁵ Far be it from You to do according to this thing, to cause the just to die with the wicked, so that the just be as the wicked; Far be it from You; shall not the Judge of all the earth do judgment?" (Genesis 19:23-25).

- The way Abraham talks to Jehovah here is how we often want to talk to the Lord when we're thinking about hell.
 - We think that we need to convince the Lord to be fair.
 - "Lord, if you destroy this city, maybe You will destroy some good people with the bad people. Did You think about that? You wouldn't want to do that. Surely, You need to do things fairly, don't You?"
- In the story Jehovah goes along with what Abraham is doing, and says He will not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if there are even ten good people there.
- In the end, there are only three people that are even somewhat good and those people are Lot and his two daughters.
 - Lot and his two daughters are not exactly the best of people.
 - But the Lord still sends angels to lead those three very flawed people out of Sodom and Gomorrah to rescue them.
- The point is, we do not have to convince the Lord to want to save people.
 - We do not have to convince Him to be forgiving, to be merciful, to be understanding, to be loving, to want nobody to go to hell.
 - That is already where He is at – times infinity!
 - The Lord is love itself, mercy itself, forgiveness itself.
 - Hell is a terrible thing to consider, but as we consider it, let's try to hold on to this reality about who the Lord is and His love and mercy.

Outline

- The way we're going to approach this topic is to first ask, does hell exist and what is it like?
 - We will look at evidence from the world and evidence from the Old and New Testaments.
- Then we'll consider a few revolutionary teachings about hell from the teachings for the New Church.

Does Hell Exist and What is it Like?

Evidence from the World

- When we look around at the world, can we find evidence that hell exists? Yes.
- Think about things that people describe as being hell or hellish.
 - One thing people say is, "War is hell."
 - A lot of us, perhaps most of us here are fortunate enough to have never experienced war.
- But I don't think that anyone who has experienced war would be hard to convince that hell exists because they have experienced a living hell.
 - Or think of the worst things that human beings have done to each other throughout history: endless examples of people treating other people terribly.
 - Those are all hell.
 - And those things certainly do not come from the Lord and heaven.
- If we look around at the world, it is not hard to find plenty of evidence of hellish behavior, hellish influence, and hellish experiences.
 - All of these hellish things seem to be related to people seeking to hurt or control other people.
 - From looking at things in this world, we can't really see anything about what might happen after death, but it would very surprising if there were hellish things in this life but no trace of them after death.

Evidence from the Old and New Testaments

- Let's now turn to the Old and New Testaments and see what we can learn about hell from them.
- In the Hebrew of the Old Testament there's one main word that is sometimes translated "hell" in English: *sheol*.
 - But *sheol* can also just mean a pit; or it can mean the grave; or it can mean the realm of the dead.
 - Sometimes it seems to be something of a neutral term – not necessarily a place where only bad people go.
 - Other times it sounds like a place of punishment, where people are humbled covered with maggots and worms (Isaiah 14:9, 11).
- It certainly doesn't sound pleasant but it's not a whole lot to go to construct a picture of what hell is like after death.

- When we turn to the New Testament, we get a bit of a clearer picture.
 - For one thing, we see many stories of people being possessed by demons and the Lord and the disciples casting those demons out.
 - Those demons must have come from somewhere and must have gone back somewhere when they were cast out.

- In the New Testament, one of the words you run into in discussions of hell is *Gehenna*.
 - One of the meanings of Gehenna is a particular geographic place, also called "the valley of Hinnom."
 - It was a place outside the city of Jerusalem where people were sacrificed in fire (2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31).
 - It seems that the word for that physical place where that terrible burning happened became a word for a place of burning after death.
 - Here are a couple of times that Jesus used the word:
 - "And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into Gehenna, into the fire that shall never be quenched...." (Mark 9:45)
 - "But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into Gehenna; yes, I say to you, fear Him!" (Luke 12:5).
 - We're now clearly talking about something that is experienced after death, that is avoidable, that is a consequence of sinning, and involves punishment with fire.

- In the New Testament you also get a few instances of the Greek word *Hades*.
 - In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man is tormented in flame in Hades (Luke 16:22-26).
 - This is similar to what is said in the parable of the sheep and goats in which the goats are told to depart from the King "into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41).
 - Other parables talk about bad people being sent into "outer darkness" with "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (e.g. Matthew 25:29).
 - These are all parables and parables are not usually meant to be taken entirely literally – nobody expects heaven to physically be like a mustard seed.
 - So it's a little unclear how literally to take these description.

- The same goes for the descriptions of hell in the book of Revelation.
 - In the book of Revelation you find descriptions of "the bottomless pit" out of which "smoke arose... like the smoke of a great furnace" (9:2) and you also find descriptions of a lake of fire and brimstone.
 - The dragon and the beast and the false prophet are all cast into the lake of fire burning with brimstone (Revelation 19:20, 20:10).
 - Intriguingly, it also says that Death and Hades were also cast into the lake of fire (20:14).
 - The "lake of fire" seems to be describing a place of perpetual fiery torment for the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet but also for normal people who are not found written in the Book of Life.

How Do We Understand All This?

- What can we understand about hell from these passages and what can we not?
 - To the question "Does hell exist and what is it like?" the Old and New Testaments seem to answer, "Yes, it exists. And it's a place of fiery torment."
 - However, all of these ideas and images of hell are contained in language that ranges from concrete descriptions to clearly metaphorical or symbolic explanations.
 - We can glean certain ideas from what's there but it's by no means a clearly delineated picture.
 - To try to get a clear and cohesive picture of what hell is from these texts will take some assembly and there will still be some rather large gaps and plenty of room for interpretation.
 - Over the centuries of Christian history, many different theories of what hell is like have been put together.
- We might think that surely our God would want us to know what hell is really like and surely He would help us understand what things are literally true and what things are meant more figuratively.
 - Yes! And He did that in the books of the teachings of the New Church which He had Emanuel Swedenborg write down.
 - The first book that was published was *Arcana Coelestia* or *Secrets of Heaven* which includes descriptions of what Emanuel Swedenborg saw when the Lord allowed him to see into hell.
 - And then there is a whole book called *Heaven and Hell*.

- Most of the book is about heaven but you can also read the ...*and Hell* portion.
- And then Swedenborg published many more books from the Lord which continue to flesh out the picture of heaven and hell.
- Let's take a look at just a few of the revolutionary things that the Lord taught us about hell through the teachings of the New Church

A Few Revolutionary Teachings About Hell from the Teachings for the New Church

The Lord Does Not Cast People into Hell But He is in Charge of It

- The first thing that you take away from reading about hell in the teachings for the New Church is a much better sense of the Lord's role in it.
- As we read in our first lesson, "the Lord never turns His face away from anyone or spurns anyone, never casts anyone into hell or is angry" (*Heaven and Hell* 545).
 - The Lord loves all people, including the absolute worst of the evil spirits in hell.
 - They are all His children and He is constantly working to bring every person into as much order and happiness as possible.
 - The teachings for the New Church say the Lord's love "surpasses all human understanding" – we can't really comprehend how much He loves us and how much He loves all people.
 - But we can get some sense of His love from how it manifests in His angels.
 - *Arcana Coelestia* 2077:2
 - To save a soul from hell the angels think nothing of giving their own lives; indeed if it were possible they would suffer hell themselves in place of that soul.
- Hell exists not because the Lord wants it to but because people insist on turning away from the Lord and to be away from the Lord is to be in hell.
- The only way people end up in hell is because they choose it over and over and over again.
- And even still, the Lord will be caring for them and doing everything He can to make their lives a little bit less miserable.
 - "If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there" (Psalm 139:8).
- The teachings for the New Church also make it clear that the Lord is in total control of hell.

- There's not some devil ruling over hell: no, the Lord has all power and is carefully keeping hell under control.
- And He does that because He cares about protecting people not in hell and because He cares about the people in hell.

Hell is Terrible

- Another thing that is very clear in the teachings of the New Church is that hell is terrible.
 - People there are absolutely vicious, heartless, without conscience, without any concern for what is good and right.
- If you read about hell, you will likely come away with a feeling of horror and grief.
- Here is one description of the difference between heaven and hell:
 - *Arcana Coelestia* 693
 - Just as love to the Lord and towards the neighbor, and the resulting joy and happiness constitute heaven, so hatred against the Lord and against the neighbor, and the resulting punishment and torment constitute hell.
- It is so sad that anyone would choose hell over heaven, would choose hatred over love, would choose punishment over joy and yet some people do and it is tragic to read the descriptions of what their lives are like.

Punishment in Hell is Not for Past Sins

- Speaking of punishment, here is another very important, revolutionary teaching about hell: you will not be punished in hell for things you did in this world.
- A lot of people think that the way it works is that a person lives their life in this world and they do some good things and some bad things and if you've done more bad things than good things then you are punished forever in hell for all the bad things you did.
 - That is NOT how it works.
- Our final lesson and the one that is printed in the pamphlet explained how it really works.
 - "No one in the other world suffers punishment on account of the evils that they had done in this world, but only on account of the evils that they then do" (*Heaven and Hell* 509).
 - This is so merciful!
 - So fair.

- The Lord is not looking to get us back for all the bad things we've done.
- But He also can't protect us from the inherent consequences of doing evil.
 - If I choose to try to hurt other people, that's going to hurt me.
 - In this world, I might not realize that I'm getting hurt too but it's the reality.
 - And after death we experience the punishment inherent in the evil that we do immediately and clearly.
- One way to think about this is that, in order to do evil, we need to get help from evil spirits who know how to do that kind of evil.
 - Maybe somebody did something that hurt me and I want to figure out just the right words to say that will really hurt them.
 - And so I invite a whole bunch of people into my house, my office, my bedroom who are really good at getting revenge and hurting people with what they say.
 - And, yeah, they help me to figure out what words to say but then they stick around in my house and I have to listen to them and I can't get away from them.
- All those scary descriptions of flames and torment in a lake of fire and brimstone are symbolic language that's trying to capture what the internal experience is like when we are consumed by hellish desire.
 - Burning with hatred or revenge.
 - Consumed by the fire of our selfish ambition and desire for control.
 - These are not things that the Lord wants for us or inflicts on us.
 - We choose them for ourselves and man, do they ever burn us and torment us!
- And so our job in this world is to work to become the kind of people who would not choose to do evil things.
 - And then we won't experience the punishment that is inherent in those evil things – in this world or in the next.

There is Huge Variety in Hell

- Another important thing that the teachings for the New Church reveal about hell is that there is huge variety in it.
 - One person's experience of being in hell is not exactly the same as the next.
 - There are many levels of hell and many different communities of hell, depending on what people love and depending on how deeply they have chosen evil.
- Maybe you have only experienced lesser forms of hell in your life or within you.

- If so, praise the Lord!
- But, even if it's a minor form of hell, take that thing that you have experienced or are experiencing and multiply it times infinity – that can still be hell.
 - Say it's just being petty about certain things – do you want to be petty about things *forever*?
 - Do you want to be self-righteous *forever*?
 - Do you want to be worrying about how you look *forever*?
- Are these the same thing as wanting to murder someone forever? No.
 - But can they still be a form of hell? Yes.

Hell is Very Powerful and Very Manipulative

- Another strong impression that you get from reading about hell in the teachings for the New Church is that hell is very powerful and very manipulative.
- The evil spirits are so good at what they do – so good at confusing, seducing, enticing, convincing, and manipulating people into doing hellish things.
 - It is absolutely clear that, if all we had to fight against hell was our own wits and will power, we would lose every single time, immediately.
 - They're too quick, too powerful.
 - We should be scared of hell and the evil spirits.
 - The minute we think that we've got them handled on our own, we are in terrible trouble.
- But, the Lord can handle them.
 - The Lord knows all of their tricks and techniques and He can protect us from all of them, if we strive to follow Him and His commandments.

Conclusion

- This brings us to our conclusion.
- There is lots more to learn and understand about hell and the role it plays in our spiritual reality, but the most important thing to know is how to avoid going there after death which is by learning how to avoid inviting hell within us right now.
 - We need to know that hell exists.
 - We need to take it seriously; we need to be appropriately scared of the fire and brimstone of hell – even if we know it's symbolic.
 - And, when we reflect and contemplate hell, we should always be thinking about the Lord too – having Him and His love as a crucial part of the picture.
- Remember that, with the Lord's help, people have been successfully fighting back against hell for thousands of years.
- And so we'll end with some encouragement from the early days of the Christian Church, from Paul's letter to the Ephesians.
 - Ephesians 6:10-13
 - ¹⁰ Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.
 - ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.