

Introduction

A few years ago, a man I met expressed how bad his work environment was. **"It's hell on earth,"** he said. We've all heard that. People in bad circumstances tell us they're going through hell on earth. But they're underestimating the badness of hell and aren't. The fact is that there's only one person in history who went through hell on earth. That person was Jesus on the cross. He went through hell on earth so that you and I wouldn't have to go through hell in hell and that's what I'm going to preach about today. My purpose in doing so is to help us grasp the magnitude of what He did as we move into Holy Week.

Hell on Earth

Psalm 22 is a remarkable prophecy of the cross minutely fulfilled. As you know, Jesus took all of our sins into Himself on the cross and paid the penalty for them that we should have paid. Psalm 22 graphically and in detail describes what that penalty was.

We begin with the detail in verse 1, which was fulfilled in Matthew 27:46. Jesus cried out, **"My God, my God, why have You forsaken me."** The word **"forsaken"** does accurately convey what Father God and the Holy Spirit did to Him. Because He bore our sins, they cut Him off, completely, from them and their goodness. They **"shunned"** Him so to speak and separated themselves in totality from Him. He died alone.

But it wasn't just the Father and Holy Spirit who rejected Him. According to verses 6-8, it was people as well. Notice the words and gestures here, which were fulfilled in Matthew 27:39, 43. Verse 6 makes clear what the crowds intended their words and gestures to do – mock, scorn, and demean Him, and they did.

Verses 12-18 add to the picture. They portray the crowds around Him as bestial, aggressive. They were like wild bulls (12), lions (13), and dogs (16). The scene here was the strong closing in on the weak,

the many on the one. Why did they? Commentator Derek Kidner explains it insightfully this way: **“The context suggests some of the motives for which men do these things to one another: resentment as those who make high claims (8); the compulsion of crowd-mentality (12, 16a); greed even for trivial gains (18); and perverted tastes – enjoying a harrowing spectacle (17).”** Imagine the perversity of that.

Then there was the physical pain Jesus bore, stated in verses 14-16. These verses were fulfilled in His scourging and crucifixion. If you saw Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of Christ*, you have some grasp of how horrific it was. The cross was the most painful and shameful instrument of execution ever invented and Jesus bore that pain and shame.

Now, let’s pull all of what I’ve just explained together and draw the logical conclusion to which it leads. The cross experience of Jesus was literally hell on earth. Notice I said **“literally.”** Father God’s wrath came against Him so that He experienced on earth exactly what the unsaved will one day experience in hell.

And that’s what I want us to learn now, what the unsaved will experience in hell. We can never fully appreciate the finished work of Jesus (His birth, life, death, and resurrection) until we do.

What Hell Won’t Be

Let’s begin with what they won’t experience, torture. Hell won’t be a torture chamber. The unsaved will have resurrection bodies and hell will be a material world. But its essence won’t be physical pain.

Listen to the words of renowned evangelist turned agnostic Charles Templeton: **“I couldn’t hold someone’s hand to a fire for a moment. Not an instant! How could a loving God, just because you don’t obey Him and do what He wants torture you forever – not allowing you to die, but to continue in that pain for eternity. There is no criminal who would do this.”** How would you answer his question? How could a loving God torture people in flames forever?

I’d answer that the premise of his question is wrong. He presumes

hell will be literal fire but it won't be. I'm not a heretic in saying that. I'm a careful interpreter of Scripture. The Bible uses vivid imagery to describe hell. It will be a "**furnace of fire**," for instance, in Matthew 13:42, but "**outer darkness**" in Matthew 8:12 and 22:13. Literal darkness is inconsistent with literal fire, which drives darkness away. The word "**fire**" in that verse and others, therefore, is metaphorical just as it is in Hebrews 12:29, which says, "**Our God is a consuming fire.**" No sensible Christian thinks God is a cosmic Bunsen burner. The word "**fire**" there clearly represents judgment and so it does with regard to hell. My point is it won't be a torture chamber that inflicts unbearable physical pain that never ends. Many believe it will be, but it won't.

What Hell Will Be

What will it be then? The opening words of verse 1 tell us. It will be being forsaken by God. I've heard several well-intentioned Christians say that God's presence won't be in hell. But that's untrue because He's omnipresent, everywhere present with His entire being. "**Everywhere**" certainly includes hell. He will "**be there**" as we say it, but will forsake everyone in it.

"**Forsake**" means two things. First, He won't manifest His presence there. He won't engage, act upon, or interact with anyone there in any way. They won't feel His presence at all. And second, He won't manifest his influence there. He will sustain its material environment and the resurrection bodies of the unsaved. But apart from that, He won't intervene there at all. There won't be any common grace for the unsaved as there is now. And the Holy Spirit won't restrain human evil as He does now. The bottom line is that God will totally and eternally separate Himself from the unsaved in hell. They'll be completely cut off from Him (His presence) and from His goodness (His influence).

That implies that the essence of hell will be relational pain. The brilliant cynic turned Christian J.P. Moreland explains it well this way: "**The essence of hell is relational. In the Bible, hell is separation**

from God, bringing shame, anguish, and regret. The pain that's suffered will be due to the sorrow from the final, ultimate, unending banishment from God, His kingdom, and the good life for which we were created in the first place. People in hell will deeply grieve all they've lost." That's an excellent analysis.

I once counseled a young man whose fiancée broke up with him, shattering his dreams of the beautiful life they'd have together. What struck me most were the depths of the anguish and regret his realization of loss made him feel.

But that pales in comparison to the unrelenting anguish and regret the unsaved will feel in hell. They'll realize three things then they don't now: (1) the utter loveliness and competence of God; (2) the breath-taking eternal life they could have had with Him; and (3) their separation from Him and that forever. They'll have a realization of loss that is more painful by far than any that's ever been experienced on earth – including the death of a beloved spouse.

But there's another element that will add to their misery – unceasing tension, conflict, and fear. Remember what I said. They'll be totally and eternally cut off from the presence and influence of God. That necessarily means they'll be left to their own devices, and those devices will be evil ones. In seven verses, Jesus teaches that there will be the **"gnashing of teeth"** in hell. That language suggests that the unsaved there will be like the crowds that closed in on Jesus, bestial, aggressive. That is, I believe, to what the gnashing of teeth refers, except on a much grander scale. Imagine the anger and lashing out in a totally godless society of people who are as Kidner described, self-absorbed. There will be no pity for others, no sacrificing for others, no rooting for others, and so on. There will be only jealousy and rivalry instead. It'll make those television reality shows, like *Dance Moms*, seem tame in comparison. Tension, conflict, and fear. That is hell.

I could share more details but that's enough to make the point. Hell is the worst possible of all fates. In three verses, Jesus describes it

metaphorically as a place “**where the worm does not die.**” In His day, the Jews sacrificed thousands of animals at the Temple of Jerusalem every week. A sewage system dispensed the vast amounts of resulting blood and fat to a place outside the city where it collected in a pool. Worms in turn gathered there to consume it, which made it one of the most disgusting places on earth. When Jesus said, “**where the worm does not die,**” therefore, He was saying that hell will be worse than that. It will be a world and life terrible beyond our ability to grasp it.

A Hell To Shun

But the good news is, no one has to go there. This week, we’re celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus. Why did He die for our sins and rise from the dead? It was for two reasons, one of which was this – that we won’t go to hell. I’d say it this way. Jesus went through hell on earth so that you and I won’t go through hell in hell.

And we won’t – if we shun it. That’s the implicit call of Psalm 22. In days gone by, evangelists and preachers said, “**There’s a heaven to gain and a hell to shun.**” If Jesus hadn’t done what He did, they’d be wrong. We’d have no choice. We’d go to hell. But He did what He did and so, we do have choice. We can gain heaven and shun hell.

But how do we do that? There’s only one way. It’s to want Jesus to be Lord. Notice I didn’t say “**want Him to help me,**” which is quite a different thing. We must want Him to be Lord.

Sadly, most people in our world don’t. They want to be lord instead and live accordingly. They make two things, self-exaltation and having their own way, paramount. Getting *what* they want *when* and *as* they want it directs and governs their lives. That in turn morphs them over time into a certain kind of people, ones who are, by their nature, suited for hell not heaven. That is, therefore, where God places them. He gives them for eternity what they’ve chosen in time.

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Shunning hell that way is a daily endeavor. We intend and try to promote Jesus and His will in all the ordinary circumstances of life. His will is that I not dominate conversations but have the ministry of listening. So, I do. His will is that I not pay for gadgetry or luxury. So, I don't. His will is that I not be thin-skinned and offended by slights. So, I'm not. His will is that I play sports, if I play them, for fun. So, I do. His will is that I do my job heartily and well. So, I do. His will is that my eyes don't ogle women, to quote Job 31:1. So, they don't. His will is that I rejoice when someone outshines me. So, I do. C.S. Lewis wrote, "**All your life long you are turning this central thing (the self we are) into a heaven creature or into a hellish creature.**" He was right. Shunning hell and gaining heaven is a daily endeavor. All the things we routinely decide and do everyday slowly but surely turn us into creatures who will be at home in either heaven or hell.

Conclusion

Do you realize what that means? People go to hell because they've chosen to. Listen to the insightful words of Dallas Willard: "**Hell is not an 'oops!' or a slip. One does not miss heaven by a hair, but by constant effort to avoid and escape God. 'Outer darkness' is for one who, everything said, wants it.**" That is the Biblical view. People don't go to hell because of what they've inadvertently decided or done. They go there because of what they've purposefully decided and done – made themselves lord instead of Jesus. Jesus went through hell on earth so you wouldn't have to go through hell in hell. So don't. Make Him Lord. You shun hell and gain heaven if you do.