



HELL

Pastor Al Detter Selected Texts

9:30 & 11:00am Grace Church November 5, 2006

1. How many have ever heard a sermon on hell? Sermons on Hell don't happen that often.
 2. Interesting message on church sign—"What Hell is Like." Below the sermon title—"Come hear our choir tonight."
 3. In September, I preached a sermon on Heaven. Not many sermons on Heaven either. It's a sermon you ought to have. CD or online. If we're going to talk about Heaven, I think we need talk about Hell.
 3. My sermons on Heaven and Hell get at one key question—"After death, then what?" Someday we're all going to die. What happens after we die? Where do we go?
 4. The Bible teaches that there are only two options for human beings after death—Heaven or Hell. One hundred years from now, every one of us here will be in one place or the other!
 5. I want to give you a penetrating and Biblical glimpse into Hell today. It's a vast subject and I can't be complete. You'll probably feel some teaching gaps. But I want to be inclusive enough so you understand the Biblical position.
 6. Hell is a reality to be avoided at all costs! That sums up everything I want to say today. Hell is an actuality and you don't want to go there!
 7. There's a lot of debate about Hell today outside and inside the church. What used to be clear teaching has become fuzzy. If there's a subject you don't want to be vague about, it's this one!
2. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 73% of Americans believe in Hell. By the way, the existence of Hell doesn't depend on how many people believe in it. The Bible tells us that there's a Hell whether we believe it or not. Our problem is not whether most people believe in Hell. It's what people believe about Hell. There are lots of viewpoints out there. I want to give you some of them. So here's my 1st point:

I. SEVEN VIEWPOINTS ON HELL

- 1) **The Traditional Viewpoint**—Hell is an actual place after death of eternal spiritual and bodily punishment for those who have not come into a saving relationship with Jesus. This has been the majority belief of the Christian church from its inception.
- 2) **The Metaphorical Viewpoint**—God will eternally punish those who have not trusted Christ as Savior. But references like fire, brimstone, and undying worms are metaphorical and not to be taken literally. People will undergo the judgment of God. But while the effects are painful, the descriptions of Hell in the Bible are not literal.
- 3) **Purgatory**—This is the classic position of multiplied millions of Roman Catholics. Those who die in a state of grace undergo purification in order to achieve the holiness necessary to enter Heaven. Purgatory is different from the punishment of hell. Purgatory is a temporary punishment due to a certain type of unforgiven sins in a state of grace. If a person dies outside the state of grace, they endure the eternal punishment of hell.

4) Mortalism—The body and soul are so intricately tied together that they cannot be separated. So when the body dies, the person passes out of existence just like animals. There is no afterlife. Mortal earthly existence is all there is. This viewpoint is rarely held among Christians.

5) Conditional Immortality—This position holds that human beings by nature are mortal beings. Here's the difference from mortalism. There's life after death for those who believe the gospel. God grants them eternal life. They survive physical death and live forever with God. But for those who have never accepted Jesus Christ, after death, they simply pass out of existence. There's no afterlife or punishment for them.

6) Annihilationism—This viewpoint holds that human beings are naturally immortal. When believers in Christ die, they live on in Heaven. When unbelievers die, they do not pass out of existence at that time. They enter a period of punishment but not in the literal sense the Bible portrays. At some point in the eschatological future, God will destroy the unbelieving person. That's the meaning of "destruction" and "perishing" in the Bible. Destruction is the everlasting punishment of the wicked, not their everlasting punishing.

7) Universalism—In this viewpoint, there's a Hell for some souls after death. But Hell is not eternal. Every soul God has ever created will someday escape Hell and be reconciled to God at the end of time. God will eventually redeem all of humanity.

1. Those are 7 viewpoints out there. It used to be that the first position, the Traditional Viewpoint, was the main position by far in the church. Not so anymore. More and more evangelical scholars are advocating Conditional Immortality and Annihilationism.

2. And for a number of reasons. For many, Hell seems inconsistent with a loving God. For others, a more compassionate approach to Hell in this modern age is more compatible with a non-coercive, good news kind of faith. For whatever reason, we live in age in which Hell is either minimized or ignored.

3. Somehow I get the sense that if we really believe Hell isn't so, then it isn't so. We're making doctrines today that negate what's unpleasant and unpalatable to us. And we do it such scholarly ways. We think that by believing something different, we can make the bad go away. It just isn't so.

4. Here's my take about the 7 positions I just spoke about. First, no one has ever gone to Hell and come back. No one can say for certain what the actual situation of Hell is. So one is better off preparing for the worst case scenario about Hell and in eternity find the actual situation to be better. But if you soften the doctrine of Hell and are wrong, when you get to eternity, look out!

5. Second, I really don't care about the 7 viewpoints I just talked about. I only care about one viewpoint. What do the Bible and Jesus say about Hell? That's the viewpoint that counts. So here's my 2nd point:

II. HELL ACCORDING TO JESUS.

1. OUR BELIEF ABOUT HELL MUST REST UPON THE REVELATION OF SCRIPTURE AND NOT ON THE VIEWPOINTS OF PEOPLE.

2. I've got a question for you. How is it that we know about Hell? One answer. Only through the Bible. Any knowledge we have of Hell is a matter of revelation. Revelation is God telling us things that would otherwise be unknown to human beings. The only way we know anything about Hell is through this book—the Bible.

3. So I'm going to pay pretty close attention to what the Bible says about Hell. That's what I'm going to believe. Especially what Jesus says about Hell. Jesus has more to say about Hell than anyone else in the Bible.

4. Not only does Jesus talk significantly about Hell in the Gospels, but He also talks about Hell a lot in the book of Revelation. Remember what the book of Revelation is? It's the revelation of Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:1). The whole book is what Jesus revealed to the Apostle John.

5. If I'm going to be a fully committed follower of Jesus, I'm going to believe what He says. I believe Jesus says what He means and means what He says! It's not for us to come up with some fancy ways to dance around what He says. If what Jesus has to say is wrong, then we've got a bigger problem than Hell on our hands.

6. Today I want to touch on six major facts about Hell from the words of Jesus. There are other references to Hell in the Bible. But since most of what we know about Hell comes from Jesus, I want to concentrate on His teaching about Hell.

1) Hell is a real, literal place. Jesus talks about a real Heaven and He talks about a real Hell. In Luke 12:5, Jesus said, "Fear the One who after He has killed (the body) has authority to cast into Hell (Matt. 10:28)." In Matthew 5:29-30, Jesus says that it is better than one of the parts of our body perish than for our whole body to go to Hell. There's absolutely no sense in these texts that Jesus is talking in figurative language. Jesus is actually trying to create a healthy fear in us of an actual reality.

Jesus is the only one to use the term "Hell" in Scripture other than James 3:6. The word for "Hell" is "Gehenna" in Greek and it simply means "Valley of Hinnom". Just south of Jerusalem was a valley called the Valley of Hinnom. Gehenna was the foul, ever-burning large refuse dump for Jerusalem. The people would see it all the time and it became a symbol for Hell. Jesus helped His hearers to understand the literal reality of something that was unseen by something that was seen.

Please understand that Hell is not a material place like earth is. But just like Heaven, it has a realm of existence with actualities. So the Bible teaches that in Hell, there will be resurrection bodies reunited with their spirits.

No one knows the location of Hell any more than we know the location of Heaven. One thing we do know however is that Hell is not on earth. One day, the earth as we know it will be destroyed by fire and a new earth will be created (II Pet. 3:12-13). Hell already exists in some location in another realm.

2) Hell is the lake of fire. Hell and the lake of fire are one and the same thing. Jesus talks about fiery Hell in Matthew 5:22. He says that Hell is an unquenchable fire in Mark 9:43-48. In Matthew 13:40-42, Jesus says that at the end of the age, those who commit lawlessness will be cast into the furnace of fire and in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Revelation 19:20, 20:14-15, and 21:8 all talk about "the lake of fire" which burns with brimstone. So Hell is a place of fire that does not consume its environment and occupants.

3) Hell is a place of terrible torment. Jesus uses some graphic word pictures to describe Hell. Obviously, the fire represents indescribable and unbearable pain. Beyond that, we're not told much about the actual torments of hell. But I think we need to realize that Hell is more terrible than language and symbols can express, just like Heaven.

4) Hell is eternal. Hell is not a temporary situation. Jesus is clear that it lasts forever. In Matthew 25:41, He says that Hell is eternal fire. In Mark 9:44, 46, and 48 Jesus quotes Isaiah 66:24 three times and says that the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. Revelation 14:11 says the smoke of the torment of those who have worshipped the beast and his image will ascend forever and ever. In Revelation 20:10, it says that the devil, beast, and false prophet will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Those who enter Hell stay there forever. There's no way out.

5) Hell will be heavily populated with human beings. Jesus said in Matthew 25:41 that the original purpose for the creation of Hell was to punish the devil and the angels who fell with him. But human beings who have joined in his rebellion against God will also be confined there. And not just a few. Jesus said in Mathew 7:13-14, "The way is broad that leads to destruction and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life and few are those who find it." The brutal facts are these. More of the human race than less will end up in Hell. A sad scenario indeed!

6) No one is currently in Hell. The devil and departed unbelievers are not currently in Hell. The Bible refers to an intermediate state called Sheol or Hades. Sheol is the Hebrew term in the Old Testament and Hades is the Greek term in the New Testament for the abode of the dead or the place of the departed, the underworld. It was a holding place for the spirits of the dead who awaited the resurrection, judgment, and their ultimate eternal abode. The Bible indicates that Hades is in the lower parts of the earth (Isa. 44:23; Eph. 4:8).

The Bible indicates that Sheol or Hades had two holding places—one for departed believers in God and the other for the departed lawless and wicked. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this is in the story of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31. When Christ was resurrected, He emptied the holding place for believers once for all. Believers today go directly into the presence of God in Heaven.

Unbelievers, however, are still confined to a place in Hades awaiting the final judgment talked about in Revelation 20:11-15. Hades is not Hell but in Hades, there is pain and punishment. The departed spirits there are alive and conscious.

The first occupants to be confined to Hell will be the beast and false prophet in Revelation 19:20-21. Next in line will be the devil 1000 years later according to Revelation 20:10. And then, according to Revelation 20:12-15, Hades will give up its dead and whoever's name is not written in the book of life will be judged by God and thrown into the lake of fire. All of this is yet future.

7. Well, that's kind of a crash course on Hell from the words of Jesus. I want to add a few footnotes of my own to these teachings on Hell.

1) Hell is fundamentally the complete absence of God to those who reside there. Never in the history of these occupants have they been totally devoid of God and His grace. But in Hell, God will never be accessible to them again. People will be granted the freedom they desired—freedom from the presence, will, and ways of God forever. In my view, the worst aspect of Hell is being forever cut off from God.

2) Hell is essentially the complete presence of self.

In Romans 1, three times it says that God gave ungodly and unrighteous people over to their own lusts and to their depraved mind (vss. 24, 26, 28). I think that's part of the brutality of Hell. Hell is the place where everyone gets to pursue their own selfish desires without restraint. I mean, look at all the fighting and crime that goes on here when people want their own way for their own ends without regard for each other.

I think Hell is a place where in their selfishness, people will hurt themselves and each other because God has given them completely over to their base selfish natures. Think of it, multiplied millions of people trying to practice their own sovereignty out of pride, selfishness, stubbornness, deception, and revenge. Much of the torture people will experience in Hell will be self-inflicted. Much of the pain will be the selfish actions of people apart from any restraining laws.

The worst thing that could ever happen is for God to allow the self reign completely unbridled in each person. That's a scary thought and that's what I think will be happening in Hell!

3) The doctrine of Hell is not ours to tamper with.

The doctrine of Hell is being called into question today in a major way. I'm talking about in our branch of Christendom. I don't think theologians, pastors, and people are trying to be malicious and introduce heresy. They're trying to reconcile a loving God with a penalty that doesn't seem to fit the crime. And they're going to the Scriptures to reinforce their interpretations with theological and exegetical arguments. Theological arguments have to do with the ways of God. Exegetical arguments have to do with how we interpret the words of Scripture.

I really don't have time to go into the reasonings behind the softening of the teaching on Hell today. But I believe we're on dangerous ground. As D. A. Carson says, "It's harder and harder to be faithful to the 'hard lines' of Scripture." You need to know that I am going to be faithful to the hard lines of Scripture in this church.

8. I want to move to my final point today. This one's really important!

III. HOW WE ESCAPE HELL.

1. If Hell is anything like what Jesus says, my #1 question is—"How can I not go to Hell?" Well, this is the good news of my sermon today.
2. The word "gospel" simply means "good news". The good news of the gospel is such good news because there's such bad news. The bad news is Hell. The good news is that we don't have to go to such a terrible place!
3. The Bible is good news because it's the story of God's initiative to rescue the world from Hell. God loved the world so much that He did all He could to get us out of Hell. It was a loving thing for Jesus to talk about a terrible Hell so that He could warn people. When you love someone, you don't want them to get hurt. And then Jesus loved the world enough to die so He could get people out of Hell.
4. God doesn't send anyone to Hell. He's done all He can to get us out of Hell. II Peter 3:9 says that God is not willing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. If we go there, we choose not to accept what God has done through Jesus Christ to rescue us from Hell. The thought of people in Hell is painful even for God. But in His righteousness and justice, He can't simply wink at sin and destroy Hell. But through the death of Christ and Christ taking Hell for us, we can be forever pardoned from Hell.
5. There are many who have watered down Hell and rarely mention it because they think that Hell is incompatible with the good news of Christ and His love. How can a God of love send anyone to Hell? I think they're missing this one by a mile. The real question is, "How can a holy God let sinful people into Heaven?" The good news is that Jesus has done everything He can to prevent us from going to Hell when that's what we deserved and when we could do absolutely nothing to prevent it in ourselves!
6. This good news has been at the heart of God's major dealings with me. I had struggled throughout my early life with true conversion. I remember giving my life to Christ at least three times. Nothing really changed.
7. But one night in a tent revival in Willow Grove, PA, God got through to me because of a message on Hell. That night changed my life.
8. Since then, the reality of Hell has been the major motivation for me to share the Gospel more than any other single factor. Hell is what drives me to share Jesus with others. I don't want anyone to go there. Take away Hell or make it soft and I lose my sense of urgency and reason to get interested in the 55,000 people around Grace that don't know Him. I lose my urgency with family and friends. The reality of Hell fuels my passion to tell others the good news of Jesus Christ! Once glimpse of Hell would change us forever!
9. But soften the doctrine of Hell and you take away the urgency of the mission of the church. If people are going to be okay in the end no matter what they do now, what's the big deal? Live the way you want on this earth and after a few possible consequences in the afterlife, Heaven is yours. I DON'T THINK SO.
10. The truth is—Hell is ahead but there's good news. Get connected to Christ for forgiveness of sin and for a life-giving relationship and Heaven rather than Hell will be your eternity. There's no better news than Jesus loves you so much that He has made a way to save you from Hell.
11. The last thing I would ever do is to sensationalize Hell and beat people up with guilt so they would accept Christ. Our job is to tell people that there's grave danger ahead but that there's good news. No one has to go to Hell. Jesus came to seek and to save those who were lost and heading towards Hell. If we ask Jesus by faith to forgive us of our sins and pardon us from Hell, He promises to deliver us from the most horrific place in the universe.
12. I could never preach on Hell and not offer you an opportunity to come to Jesus. If you've never asked Jesus to save you from Hell, if you're not sure that you're headed for Heaven, then this is your moment of decision. This can be the moment you pass from death into life and from the wide road to Hell to the narrow to Heaven. Invite Jesus Christ to save and forgive you right now. Make sure of your destiny today!