

Good Evening!

Every week, we're looking at a subject that troubles people about Christianity, and this week, we are looking at the idea

“that God is a judge who consigns people to hell”

and the basic **understandable** objection is

well how can you possibly reconcile the concept of hell with the idea of a loving God?

How can a loving God ever send people to hell?

Judgement, hell / loving God - They just don't go together!

So how do we respond to this?

How do we respond to this most unpopular Christian doctrine?

Well I'd like to look at the passage that was read to us in Luke 16:

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

But before we dive in, I need to say a couple of things.

Firstly, the idea that hell involves demons running around with pitch-forks stabbing and torturing people is mediaeval clap-trap and completely non-biblical.

This is not what the Bible teaches and we need to distance ourselves from it.

Secondly, the Bible's common image of hell as FIRE is a *metaphor*.

Hell isn't actually fire. It isn't really fire – Fire is a metaphor –

It's a metaphor of the disintegration and destruction that FIRE brings.

So hell isn't your BART SIMPSON image of flames and demons and all that; and it is NOT literally “fire”!

What it IS, is

crucial for understanding our own identity;

crucial to seeing what's going on in our life; and

crucial to our understanding of the love of God.

Hell is crucial for understanding

our own identity; our life; and God's love.

And I know that sounds daft, and

I know it sounds highly unlikely, but I want to show you why its true:

Hell is essential to knowing our identity, our lives and God's love.

So would you turn with me to Luke chapter 16v19 –

And we'll get stuck in...

1. Hell is crucial for understanding our own Identity.

v19 'There was a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.

At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table.

Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried.

The parable introduces us to two people.

One was phenomenally wealthy.

He dressed expensively, he ate sumptuously, not a day passed without some banquet being held and food falling from his over-laden table.

His home shouts power and importance and prosperity oozes out of this man - his clothes, his food, his house. 'He was rich'.

The other was poor

He was a beggar,

He had no fine clothes - he was covered with sores;

He had no sumptuous food - he was permanently hungry

He had no friends - only dogs for company

His poverty was as extreme, as the rich man's wealth.

But there is one thing that this poor man has which the rich man doesn't...

He has a name.

His name is Lazarus

it means "the one whom God helps"

In life it must have seemed cruel – it wasn't...

This is the ONLY parable in the whole Bible where a person is given a name. This is unusual and important.

Lazarus has a name.

To have a name is to be a person, to have a name is to be known, to have a name is to recognise when someone is calling you.

The rich man he has no name.

He is anonymous.

When he was alive he was a celebrity

But now he's dead, he is nameless, anonymous – and he doesn't recognise the call of God.

Lazarus' name ("the one whom God helps") shows that his life has been about trusting God

He has had nothing for all his life – but for all his life he has faithfully invested his hopes, his longings, his prayers in God, he has flung himself on God – no one else would help him, but we see that God does.

The rich man, on the other hand, has invested his hopes, his longings, his priorities in wealth.

He has become a self-made man – he has no need of God.

And now death has come and stripped **them both** of everything,

everything has been taken away

every prop, every crutch, every mask has been stripped away

And now they stand naked in death.

And the rich man has nothing left – everything has gone.

Lazarus has just one thing, the only thing he had, the only thing that lasts: his name, his hope, his trust in God.

The Rich man has invested everything he has in the riches of this world and now he can't take any of it with him he has nothing left.

Abraham says v25 "*remember you had your good things*"

You **had** them!

You fulfilled your dreams, you achieved your goals, you made a name for yourself,

You had all those things that gave you status and identity.

You had it all and you **chose** to let it define you and give you your identity.

But now you're dead, now they're gone and what is left of you?
Who are you?

Everything you based your life on,
everything that shaped your soul,
everything that drove your values,
is gone!
You have nothing left!
no identity.
no name.
no nothing.

Every one of us has something that we live for.

Every one of us have good things that we plan for, hope for, strive for, live for.
These are the things that we feel will give our life value and meaning.
They make us who we are

It could be our job - who am I?
I am a good teacher, a successful business-man, a great home-maker, a skilled doctor
it could be our family – I am a Father, Mother, Married, Parent,
it could be what we're good at – I am a talented artist, musician, fashion guru,

Every one of us pursues good things to give our life meaning.

FINE. But when we turn those good things into ultimate things
when we choose to make these things our identity
that is when hell begins.

The beginnings of hell, is when we build our identity on something that is not God.

look when we take “good things”, and make them our identity
- when we take our family (a good thing) and make it the prime focus of our life,
- when we take our career (a good thing) and let IT set our priorities
- when we make possessions the subject of our dreams.
- when we say of anything “if I have you THEN I will be happy”
you define my hopes...

That is the beginnings of Hell for if we ever lose them – then “WE” will be lost, our identity will not just be hurt, it will be gone

If we invest our identity in anything this world has to offer as our “ultimate”
Then when the floods come, when the darkness falls, when death arrives we will be left with nothing.

This parable says
Only our relationship with God
Only our identity in God
Only our friendship with God
will last.

So the doctrine of hell calls us to look deep into ourselves and ask:
“well who are we?”
“what are we investing our life in?”

Do we have a living relationship with God?
Are we his child?
Will that friendship be my companion for eternity; OR

are we living for this world
will we die as a stranger to God?
not knowing him, not wanting him, having no identity in him?

The reality of Hell makes us face our identity!
who are we?
Will our identity last only as long as this world – and then we will be forgotten?
Or will our identity last with God forever?
But it goes further

2. Hell shows us what is going on in our life.

v23 *In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire."*

Hell is a place where satisfaction cannot be found.
Because when we make good things, “ultimate things” we will never be satisfied by them
Good things don’t ultimately satisfy
Yet we act as if they WILL.

It’s almost like we are addicted to chasing after good things – thinking they are ultimate things.
We believe that things like
my looks, **my** house, **my** possessions, my status, my comfort, my pleasure WILL satisfy
We are selfish creatures (gathering things around us)...
There is within us an addiction to self,

We **all** struggle with this
We **all** struggle with selfishness.
None of us are perfect.
None of us **can be** perfect even if we tried.
<quiet>... It is like we are addicted to Self and things that won’t satisfy.
Do you see?

We know a lot about addiction.
We all have friends (or friends of friends) who struggle with addiction:
addiction to alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, food disorders, even the approval of others can be an addiction

We all know of friends who struggle with this stuff – we struggle with some of this stuff!...

And wherever there is addiction there is disintegration

As addiction grows, we need more and more of it, because we get less and less satisfaction from it.
and if left **unchecked** our addictions will dominate: our life, our thoughts, our actions.
left **unchecked** our life disintegrates around it.

Our addiction to self is the same.
Selfishness is Fire! - if we leave it unchecked it will consume us and destroy our life
Hell Fire is selfishness unchecked.
Hell is selfishness unchecked...

It is a fire within each of us right now.

And any Addiction unchecked brings isolation.

Any addiction eventually drives away those people who love us
I have seen marriages, families, friendships, fall apart because of addiction.
It drives away those that love us

Sin does this too - the more selfish we are the more isolated we become
That's obvious...

But worst of all with Addiction we have Denial.

The rich man is blind to what has put him in hell
He still expects Lazarus to be his servant and he treats him like a water boy.
He doesn't ask to get out of hell, instead he seeks to shift the blame
he strongly insinuates that God didn't give him enough information about the afterlife!

in v27 he says "*get Lazarus to go and tell my brothers*"

What's he hinting at?

He's saying "no-one came to tell **me**",

"**I** didn't get **all** the information I needed".

"How do you expect me to make the right choices when no one from the dead came back to tell me!"

There is no repentance here,
There is no acceptance that he is in Hell because of his free choice.
Even in hell there is denial!

Hell fire is selfishness unchecked
It is what is going on in each of us

It is about the Divine and the Selfish fighting for our soul within us!
The Divine fighting with the Selfish
Do you sense the battle raging in your life?

But what would happen if the Divine left us to ourselves
what would happen if we said to God, **just one time too often** –
I do not want you to be God in my life!!
Leave me alone!

Would it not be hell!
Would the fire not rage unchecked?

Hell isn't something God does to us
It is something we chose for ourselves (selfishness)
It shows us what is going on in our life when we say to God
"I do not want you to be God"
"I do not want you to be my ultimate"
"I am going to invest myself in other things!"

This is the fire.
Do you not see it in yourself?
Do you not see where it is leading?
Do you not see what will happen if you say to God leave me alone!

Hell is not the mediaeval idea of God throwing people into a pit and them then climbing up the side saying "let me out, let me out"

Hell is our choice to put our identity in something that is not God and WILL not satisfy.

Hell is our addiction to self – unchecked.

It is investing our identity in anything other than God

It is a real reality in our lives; and

3. Finally, Hell is necessary to know the love of God

v27 He said "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."

'Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."

"No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

Abraham said "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

The rich man asks for a miracle,

he says "send Lazarus back"

"if Lazarus appears **they will HAVE TO believe** –

for they will have a naked spectacular miracle",

They would say "Oh my goodness this is Lazarus!!, isn't he dead?"

Well not anymore

And Lazarus would say "THERE IS A HELL"

And they would be so scared that they would say

"Oh my God I don't want to go to hell –

I had better lead a good life".

And Abraham says "it'll never work"

It'll never work because FEAR never changes a person's heart.

What is wrong with you and me?

What is wrong with the world?

self-centeredness, self absorption, "me, me, me",

"me in front of you, me before you, me instead of you"

that's what wrong.

Our addiction to self is what is wrong

Our addiction to self in front of God is what leads to disintegration...

And if we say

"I had better be good because I don't want to go to hell"

Are we really changing?!

Are we simply not trying to save our skins?!

(is it not simply a selfish motivation!)

Are we not just being cynical saying : *Quick God is coming look busy!*

Look someone who regularly breaks the speed limit will never do it when they know there is a police car behind them. Right! Why?

is it because suddenly they have become upright moral citizens?

is it because they have seen the error of their ways?

is it because their heart has changed and they are repentant?

*NO! It is because they don't want to be caught!
Their heart hasn't changed
They are just acting out of self preservation.
Fear does not change our heart.
It doesn't change us.*

So sending someone back from the grave to prove the reality of hell will not change our heart.

So what will?...

Only knowing radical love.

Radical love is the only thing that can take our mistrusting, selfish heart and change it
Radical love can take our self-focussed lives and show us a better way
Radical counter-intuitive love can change our heart

Where are we going to find this love?

Well, doesn't your spine tingle when the man says

"No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

Well no they won't -

Resurrection by itself won't do it!

Proof alone is NOT enough - we need something more...

We need to know that God so **loved us** that Jesus died for us...

We need to know this love and the extent of it –

And HELL does this...

Look imagine a friend of mine comes to me and says

"hey, I was at your house the other day and someone asked for a bill to be paid - so I paid it for you".

We won't understand how to respond until we know how much it cost them to pay it.

If it was just the postman asking for postage "a few pence" – then we'd say to our friend

"thank you" - but it won't change our life

*But if it was the Bailiffs threatening to foreclose on our mortgage,
if they were threatening to take our home and all our possessions?*

*If the bill was for tens of £100,000 and
our friend paid it and saved us from destitution and homelessness.*

That is a completely different matter!

Until I understand how much it cost my friend to pay my debt

I will never know how to react.

I will not know whether to say "thanks" and pat him on the back, or
whether to say nothing and fall at his feet.

Unless you believe in hell you will never know how much God loves you

Because on the cross Jesus went to Hell for you!

If our choice to say to God – You are NOT God in my life,

If our addiction to self,

inevitably leads to disintegration and isolation from all those who love us

Then isn't this exactly what happened to Jesus on the cross!!

Did his life not disintegrate?
Did his body not fall apart?
Did his friends not run away?
Did our sin not isolate him from the one who has always loved him!??

Until we know how much it cost Jesus to take our selfishness upon his soul we will never know how much God loves us.

We will never know how much he values us

We will never know.

Why does Jesus Christ speak more about hell than anybody else in the Bible?
Why does Jesus talk about it in this parable in such stark and shocking terms?
Because he will do everything he can to get us to choose differently.

Because when our sins were laid upon him
he experienced the disintegration of his soul and an utter isolation that has never been known *“My God, my God - why have you forsaken me?”*.

And he will do all he can to save us from that...

He did it because he loves you.

And unless we believe in hell we will never know how much he loves us.

We will never know how much he cares.

Never.

If you want to be transformed
if you want to be lost in wonder, love and praise,
If you want to be able to sing “love so amazing so divine - demands my life my soul my all”.
Then you need to know how much God loves you.

Hell is a challenge...

1) When all is stripped away – who are you?

A child of God, known, loved cherished by him for all eternity,

OR someone who has spent their life investing their identity in things.

And what will be left when all is stripped away?

2) What is going on in your life?

Do you sense the divine fighting with the selfish?

CS Lewis puts it like this

In the long run, the answer to people who object to hell is simply a question...

“what are you asking God to do?”

To wipe out your past sins and give you a fresh start?

He did that on Calvary.

To forgive you? He offers that on the cross

To go away and leave you alone? You WOULD CHOOSE that???

For him to go away and leave you to yourself???

That is what hell is!

And He would give everything he has to persuade you to choose differently!

3) Do you see how much God loves you and longs to save you?

Do you **see** his love?

Then choose this day to make God, God;
To accept his forgiveness,
To invite within you the presence of God
that satisfies the soul, that gives you peace, that will never let you down.

Choose to invest your identity in God...
and those good things? – they will be given to you as well
But choose this day whom you will serve... SELF or God.