

## What's the Purpose of Hell?

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer  
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No. 5: Heaven and Hell  
Scripture: Romans 1:18-32

Around the year 700 a man named Paulinus took the gospel of Christ to Northumbria.

He was invited to preach in the Court of King Edwin. When the missionary arrived he was escorted to a large hall where hundreds of influential people were waiting for him.

It was evening and the hall was lit by burning torches. He was about to speak when a Swallow flew in one end of the long hall, passed over the guests and flew out the other end.

King Edwin turned to Paulinus and said, "Our lives are like that Swallow. We come in from the darkness, pass briefly through the light of this world and exit into darkness. Can your new religion tell us what happens when we die?"

Paulinus told the King, "Yes, I can. We either go to heaven or hell."

For the past month we have been looking at these two destinies. We have seen that heaven is the realm of God and it is the eternal reward of all who believe and follow Christ. It is a place of indescribable joy and peace.

Hell could not be more different. It is created for those the Bible calls impenitent, unrighteous or wicked. It is a place of damnation, punishment, anguish and destruction. The Christian gospel provides the hope of heaven but warns that those who reject that gospel are on the road to hell.

One theologian remarked that there is no more unpalatable subject in Christian theology than hell.

So why concern ourselves with it?  
Because hell is part of the whole counsel of God.  
It is a basic building block of Christian belief.



In the New Testament church the doctrine of hell was one of the ABCs for new converts.

The writer to the Hebrews refers to "Eternal judgment" as part of the "elementary teachings" about Christ. (Hebrews 6:1-2)

The scriptures are our constitution.

So we need to know every part of them.

Imagine a lawyer never reading the First Amendment of our Bill of Rights which grants us freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly.

They would get a completely false idea of what it means to be an American.

They might imagine that instead of a place of liberty America is a place of tyranny.

When the Church of Jesus Christ ignores an important doctrine like hell, it loses its way.

We might conclude that we are here on earth just to keep a list of commandments and do a few kind deeds.

The gospel is emasculated and the church becomes irrelevant.

So today we ask **WHAT'S THE PURPOSE OF HELL?**

There is an outline in your RidgeLines if you would like to follow along.

We know that God does everything for the purpose of revealing the magnificence of his glory.

Everything he does is good and right.

Therefore hell is good and right.

Today we are going to seek to understand what is beneficial in the doctrine of eternal punishment so we can comprehend why God created hell.

First the purpose of hell is to **DISPLAY GOD'S WRATH.**

Now we are not accustomed to talking about God's wrath. We would rather sing about his grace, his love and his mercy. But the scriptures also speak of his wrath. It is part of his divine character. It is therefore beautiful.

In the passage we just read Paul writes, **"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven." (v 18)**

What is this wrath that is being revealed?

John Murray defines it as, "The holy revulsion of God's being against all which is the contradiction of His holiness."

God's wrath is, "His holy hostility to evil, his refusal to condone it or come to terms with it, his just judgment upon it." (John Stott)

Paul goes on to tell us that God's wrath is directed **"Against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness." (v 18)**

Let's examine some of those important words.

**Godlessness** is the denial of God.

It is the attempt to get rid of God and to live as if he didn't exist.

Since the first commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, the greatest sin is denying God and dismissing God by living in deliberate disregard of God. This brings God's wrath upon us.

**Wickedness** refers to our assault upon God's will, upon God's just ordering of the world.

It is the disregard of God's law.

Since God's law is the expression of his nature it is another form of resistance to God.

Wickedness also brings God's wrath upon us.

So what does the wrath of God have to do with hell?

Bruce Milne tells us, "Just about everything.

Hell is simply the expression of God's wrath after death.

It is the eternal form of God's anger."

Swiss theologian Emil Brunner tells us that hell is, "The working out of the divine glory upon those who refuse to give God glory."

So here is Paul's point in this first chapter of Romans. God has created us in his image for the purpose that we might know him.

God has revealed himself to us in a multitude of ways.

First, through creation, then through our conscience and finally through Christ.

However, instead of delighting in this revelation and responding to it by loving and adoring and serving God we try to erase this revelation or as Paul puts it we,

**"Suppress the truth by our wickedness."**

The result is we become people whose **"Foolish hearts were darkened." (v 21)**

We have chosen the lie that there is no God or at least no God who has any claim upon us.

As human beings we were created to worship God.

If we don't worship the true God then we find an idolatrous replacement.

So we **"Exchange the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." (v 23)**

The result is that God gives us over to our sinful desires and shameful lusts or as Paul puts it, **"He gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not be done." (v 28)**

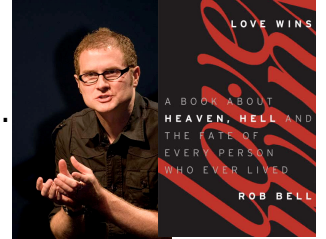
This is dreadfully serious and Paul warns us, **"Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for**

**the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed." (2:5)**

The outcome of this judgment offers only two possibilities.

One is eternal life which Paul describes as glory, honor and peace. The other is wrath which Paul tells us, **"Will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil." (2:9)**

Last week I mentioned Rob Bell's bestselling book "Love Wins". Pastor Bell rightly values the love of God and wants to lift it high and so he suggests that perhaps God's love will deliver us all from hell.



I am sure Rob Bell had pure motives in writing this book. He wants to help those who are walking away from the church because they can't stomach the doctrine of hell.

But I suggest that he is too easily dismissing the truth of God's wrath against those who deny his Son.

It is dangerous to ignore a subject that is mentioned nearly 200 times in the Bible. A heresy is not usually a falsehood.

Rather it is one truth pushed to the exclusion of other truths. That is why it is vital that we hold the twin doctrines of God's love and his wrath together.

God's wrath means we are judged for our sin.

God's love means that Christ died to save us.

But if we ignore that salvation we should tremble at the prospect of standing before a wrathful creator.

So God created hell as a place to display his wrath.

Second the purpose of hell is to **DEMONSTRATE CHRIST'S VICTORY.**

Hell is a statement of Christ's victory for God will be glorified as greatly in hell as he will be in heaven.

In hell Jesus will crush the devil's head.

In hell he will slay the dragon.

In hell he will vanquish the anti-Christ.

In hell Christ's victory over evil will be on display.

Jesus' victory over sin, death and the devil was demonstrated on Easter morning when he rose from the tomb.

But that triumph was only witnessed by a few hundred.

One day all of creation will acknowledge Christ's complete victory for he declares, **"I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! I hold the keys of death and Hades."**

**(Revelation 1:18)**

Our victorious Savior holds the keys.

Think what keys are used for.

First keys are used for opening and our Lord can open the gates of death and hell. He can open the pearly gates of heaven and admit his people in.

But a key is also used to close the door.

His golden key will shut his people into heaven but they will also shut the gate of heaven against unbelievers.

So in trembling reverence we say that hell exists to demonstrate Jesus' victory.

Hell is ruled by Christ.

It is not out of his reach. It is not an independent, self-contained demonic kingdom.

In hell his kingly authority will be seen more clearly than every before. Fresh aspects of his holiness and justice will be revealed to his wondering people.

J.I. Packer tells us that hell reflects the adorable justice of a holy creator who deals righteously with people according to their works.

Without hell there would be no real justice.

If there is no hell God is not just because if there is no punishment then heaven is apathetic to the drug lords and tyrants and mass murderers in our world.

If there is no hell then God is blind towards their victims. He has turned his back on those who pray for relief.

If there is no wrath towards evil then God is not love for love hates that which is evil.

We all agree that heaven is a comforting doctrine.

What is overlooked is that hell is comforting too.

Our news is filled with stories of rape, child abuse and injustice but in the presence of an all-knowing God there will be no unsolved murders, no unknown child abductors and no hidden bribes.

That is why Revelation tells us that the inhabitants of heaven praise God for hell.

The twenty-four elders fall down on their faces before him saying **"We give thanks to you Lord God Almighty . . . because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry, and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead . . . and for destroying those who destroy the earth."**

**(Rev. 11:17-18)**

In hell the perfect justice of Jesus will be seen.

No one will object to his judgment.

No one will shout "This is unfair."

One of the most terrifying stories that Jesus told is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man lived a selfish life, indifferent to God and to the suffering of

those around him. When he died he finished up in hell and it is fascinating to notice the questions he does not ask in Hell.

First, he doesn't ask why I am here?

Second, he doesn't ask why is Lazarus in heaven?

Third, he doesn't ask when is my torment going to end?

Fourth, he doesn't ask when do I get out?

Fifth, he doesn't ask for justice.

Sixth, he never asks for a new plan of salvation.

And seventh, he never asks for company.

He didn't ask because the answers to all those questions were self evident to him in hell.

Third, God's good purpose in creating Hell is to **DEVELOP GODLY FEAR.**

Did you know that the Bible encourages us to fear?

The reason is that, **"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."**  
**(Proverbs 1:7)**

So the Psalmist urges us to, **"Serve the Lord with fear." (Psalm 2:11)**

Jeremiah implores, **"Let us fear the Lord our God." (Jeremiah 5:24)**

Jesus warns, **"Fear him who . . . has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him."**  
**(Luke 12:5)**

What produces this godly fear?

It is the judgment of God.

When God destroyed the earth by flood it produced fear. When God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah it produced fear. When God turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt it produced fear.

When God struck down Ananias and Sapphira because they lied to the apostles Luke tells us, **"Great fear seized the whole church." (Acts 5:11)**

God has given us the doctrine of hell that we might develop a godly fear. We fear that we will do wrong and we fear that we won't do right.

So the angel instructs every nation on earth in a loud voice, **"Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come." (Revelation 14:7)**

Now please don't get the idea that this godly fear is negative. It comes from God and therefore leads to positive and life giving action.

Not only does it mean that we will have a grave concern for our own soul but we will also be passionately concerned about others.

On those occasions when we could take advantage of another person we won't because we know there is a day of reckoning.

We are also concerned about others because we understand their plight even if they do not.

George Bernard Shaw remarked, "All the interesting people will be in hell." But that is flippant nonsense.

The devil will be in hell, cast into the lake of fire and brimstone. (Revelation 20:10)  
Accompanying him will be his angels. (Matthew 25:41)

Hell is also for the notoriously wicked.

But it is also the home of those, **"Who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."**  
**(2 Thessalonians 1:8)**

Shaw imagines that hell will not be so bad. It will.

It will be unspeakably terrible.

John Piper writes, "The misery of hell will be so great that no one will want to be there. They will be weeping and gnashing their teeth. Between their sobs they will not speak the words "I want this". They will not be able to say amidst the flames of the lake of fire, "I want this." The smoke of their torment goes on forever and ever. They have no rest day or night. No one wants this.

The person who rejects God does know the real horrors of hell. This may be because they don't that hell exists or maybe because they have convinced themselves that hell is nicer than heaven.

When people die they will be shocked beyond words. The miseries of hell are so great they would do anything in their power to escape.

What sinners want is not hell but sin. But hell is the inevitable consequence of unforgiven sin.

It is like a person wanting chocolate.

They enjoy the chocolate but they don't want obesity.

Or a person wants a cigarette for the nicotine high but they don't want lung cancer.

It is the same with sin.

People see sin as attractive but no one chooses hell.

That is why God doesn't send people to hell.

He has to throw them into hell.

Revelation tells us, **"If anyone's name is not found written in the book of life he was thrown into the lake of fire."** (Rev. 20:15)

The reason the Bible speaks of people being thrown into hell is that no one is willing to go there once they see what it is really like.

No one, standing on the shore of the lake of fire jumps in.

So what can we do?

Jesus asked, **"How will you escape being condemned to hell?"** (Matthew 23:33)

That is the most important question in life.

The answer is, **"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."**  
**(Acts 16:31)**

Believe that Jesus made you for the greatest of all possible purposes of knowing him.

Believe that he died on the cross for your sins which would otherwise drag you into hell.

Believe that he is alive today and sends his Holy Spirit who helps us to live a righteous life.

When we believe in Christ like that we can say with Paul, **"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death."** (Romans 8:1-2)

The good news is that we can escape hell.

We know this on the authority of God's word.

We find wonderfully hopeful verses like these,

**"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."** (John 3:17)

**"The Lord is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."** (2 Peter 3:9)

**"God our Savior desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth."**

**(1 Timothy 2:4)**

Hell is as true and as real as heaven.

Hell is part of the gospel message.

Jesus wasn't embarrassed to talk about hell but his church today is. As a result we have lost something of the wonder of God's grace.

People think they can be followers of Christ and live like everybody else. There is no godly fear.

There is nothing distinctive about our lives.

But it is that difference that makes the Christian faith attractive.



There is a magician on our TV called Penn Gillette.

He is an atheist but he says in a You-Tube video that if he was a Christian he would tell everyone about hell. He cannot imagine why anybody who believes in hell would keep quiet about it. He says that seems to be the most unloving thing you can possibly do.

Our mission as a church is to storm the gates of hell.

We want to find people who would otherwise be lost for all eternity and introduce them to Jesus Christ.

So come and join us. Enroll in Christ's army.

Let us hold high the cross as together in the power of the Spirit we storm Satan's stronghold and rescue his captives.