

## **Do I Really Have to Believe *That*? Theology Gone Awry**

### **Do I Really Have to Believe in Hell?**

Luke 16:19-31

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Our conversations throughout this series, this “Do I Really Have to Believe *That*?” series, they’ve gotten increasingly complicated, haven’t they?

Do you have to believe in scripture as the literal word of God? No. You can, but you don’t have to, and I really don’t recommend it.

Do you have to believe in predestination? No. No, but that’s a “no” with an asterisk, because whether you believe in predestination or not, the truth is that you have always been predestined to be loved by God.

Do you have to believe in forgiveness? It’s really complicated. That’s about as definitive as I got last week — because forgiveness is so incredibly layered and a life of faith can handle complexity.

So in terms of what you “have” to believe, so far we’re at no, no\*, and “it’s really complicated.”

Which brings us to this week: Do you have to believe in hell? No. But also, yes.

Let me explain.

The vast, vast majority of theological debate about hell isn’t particularly well-rounded. Almost all of the commentary you can find anywhere about hell is concerned with just one thing: how to avoid it.

I imagine some of you might have a story similar to this one. Back when I was in college, my freshman year, I was assigned a randomly selected roommate. Her name was Jana, and we got along well enough. She played basketball, I played field hockey. She

was messy, but willing to share her snacks. Jana was also very evangelical. So one afternoon she pulled her chair up alongside my desk with great urgency. “Are you certain of your salvation, Jenny?” Suffice it to say, I was not particularly prepared for that moment. I went to Catholic school from kindergarten through 12th grade, but this question had never come up. “Um, yes?” I said. “Are you sure? Are you sure and certain?” “I ... I think so?” “Jenny, I want to make sure,” she said. “Would it be okay if we said the prayer together? The prayer that would make sure?” “... okay.” And so Jana prayed with gratitude that in accepting Jesus, I had saved myself from the depths and flames of hell. I was not entirely sure what we had just accomplished, but she said, “I’m so glad I don’t have to be afraid for you anymore!” and we both went back to our books.

The problem is that too many Christians capitalize on that fear, and in fact even encourage it. Too many churches use theology in general, and hell in particular, as a scare tactic, because fear is a remarkably effective tool for controlling what someone thinks or how someone lives their life. And it is not always as harmless as it was with my college roommate. Too often, the threat of hell is what is hung over someone’s head while someone else tries to convince them that how they vote, or who they love, or what they believe, or anything else about them, is wrong.

But fear has no place in the tool belt of the faithful. Because one of the things Jesus

said more than anything else was, "Do not be afraid." He came to alleviate our fear, not to manipulate it. Jesus never once scared anyone into following him. It was never about the fear he could instill. It was always and only about the life he could offer.

So then what are we to make of scripture's references to hell, especially the words that come out of Jesus' own mouth? It's a fair question.

The word "hell" shows up 12 times in the New Testament. Eleven of those 12 times are from Jesus. And when Jesus talks about hell, he almost always uses the Greek word "gehenna." If you chase "gehenna" down to it's most basic meaning, you learn that Gehenna was the name of a place, a specific, tangible, historically verified place. It was a valley, a deep valley, on the southwest side of Jerusalem. And that valley, in the centuries before Jesus, was used as a place for ritual sacrifices. But city officials found that displeasing, and so they decided to repurpose the valley into the only thing that could both fill up that kind of space and keep people away from it at the same time.

The valley of Gehenna became the local garbage dump.

A valley carved into the earth by time where trash was collected and fires were kept burning around the clock in order to keep the amount of trash under control. A place where wild animals would fight over scraps of food found at the edges, snapping and gnashing their teeth at one another. A place where no one of any means wanted to be, so by default, a place where the outcast and the lowly, the last and the least, found themselves stranded when every other option had been exhausted.

That is what Jesus is referring to when he uses the word "gehenna."

The other word Jesus uses is Hades. He only uses it a couple of times, but one of those times is in our reading for today. It's in the

parable Jesus tells about the rich man and Lazarus.

You heard Sam read it. There is an incredibly rich man: he wears purple every day and he feasts extravagantly every day. Here's what else happens every day: a poor man named Lazarus, who is starving to death and covered in sores, sits outside the rich man's gates. That's all we hear about their lives.

In death, angels come for Lazarus, who is taken to heaven where he is greeted by none other than Abraham himself. The rich man is taken to Hades, where he suffers mightily. In the midst of his distress, he looks up and notices Abraham and Lazarus, far away, but within sight. So he calls out, "Abraham, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus there to fetch me some cool water, because maybe you haven't noticed, but I'm burning up over here."

And Abraham says, "O child, no. No," he says, "because do you remember how you lived? You had all sorts of good things and Lazarus had absolutely nothing, so now he is the one in comfort and you are the one in agony."

I know. It's a hard story. But look at it with me again.

The first time the rich man sees Lazarus in any capacity at all is after they have both died. When all of a sudden, the rich man, who previously wanted for nothing, needs something. Prior to that, their paths crossed every day one their lives. The text is clear about that. And every day, the rich man looked right past him. The rich man's sin wasn't the fact that he was rich. There is no direct critique of his wealth in this story. And his sin wasn't that he was cruel to Lazarus. It wasn't that he looked Lazarus in the eyes and said, "No, I will not share what I have with you." His sin was that he never looked at Lazarus at all.

Do you remember what Elie Wiesel once said? Having survived the Holocaust, this was his observation: "The opposite of love is not

hate; it's indifference. The opposite of beauty is not ugliness; it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy; it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death; it's indifference."

Now I know, Jesus specifically mentions Hades, which in Greek mythology is often associated with death and the underworld. But those who heard Jesus and those who helped assemble the gospels that tell us about Jesus would have also known this: Hades, the mythological place, is named for Hades, the mythological god, whose name means "the unseen one." The rich man, who never once saw Lazarus in life, now finds himself in the land of the unseen.

The Gospels are too carefully constructed for that to be mere coincidence. And what the Gospels taken as a whole tell us, and what Luke especially tells us, from start to finish is that Jesus will usher in a great reversal:

When the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

When the hungry shall be filled and the stuffed sent away.

When the poor shall receive and rich hands remain empty.

When the invisible will be seen and the indifferent learn what it is to be ignored.

When those who have been cast aside are welcomed home and those who have done the casting out experience the city dump's flames.

When those who know what a living hell feels like are rescued and those who have perpetuated broken systems are held accountable.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus has absolutely nothing to do with anyone's address in the afterlife. It is but one more serious affirmation that Jesus is making and will continue to make good his promise that there is a place for all of God's children.

You see, it's not a story about hell, but it is a story about death — the kind of death that leads to life, like when Jesus says elsewhere

that you will have to lose your life in order to find it again. Sometimes we have to give up life the way we know it in order to live life the way God intends. Because the kingdom of God will always find a way.

So back to the question of hell and whether you really need to believe in it. Let me be perfectly clear: if I understand the text, there is nothing in scripture — nothing anywhere in scripture — not even the passages that mention hell and Hades — nothing in scripture ever suggests Jesus will abandon us to eternity. But there is plenty in scripture — all throughout scripture — that suggests that neither will he abandon us to our own ignorance, our own stubbornness, our own selfishness, our own indifference. He loves us too much for that. And he simply will not rest until full restoration has come into everyone's life, including ours.

Do you have to believe in hell? Here's what I can tell you.

If hell is a place where we are tormented forever, or where flames consume us or where we are apart from God for all eternity, well, I don't believe in that kind of hell at all. I'd even go so far as to say that kind of hell is antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it is revealed to us in scripture.

But if hell is a condition of living in which children go to bed hungry, and black and brown folks wake each day wary, and health care is a luxury, not a right, and loneliness is pervasive, and grief is unbearable, that kind of hell is not only worth believing in, it's worth taking very seriously. In fact, if we are to call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ, we will stand up at the gates of that hell and prevail upon them until the day they fall forever.