

Urban Legends

Death Always Leads To A Better Place

Funerals are a necessary part of the process of saying “Good bye” to someone we love. All down through history every culture has grappled with the reality of death and what lies on the other side. Different societies have different funeral expressions but they almost all acknowledge life after death.

Human life is so special and so unique that we intuitively know that there must be something more. That we can’t just live out a few years with our personalities and emotions and self awareness and then just evaporate into nothing.

Down inside we realize there’s some existence after death. And so we stand over the casket of grandma, or whoever, and say things like, “At least she’s not suffering anymore.” “He looks so peaceful.” “She’s looking down from heaven on us right now.” “He’s in a better place.”

Here’s the difficult question we all need to recon with; does death always lead to a better place? Is it always true that a person who dies is better off than when they were alive?

We’re in the last Sunday of a series we’re calling Urban Legends. This has been a study in which we’ve tried to tackle some of the spiritual myths that float around so freely that people repeat them just assuming they must be true.

So far we’ve debunked myths like, Difficulties must mean that God is punishing me, If you have enough faith you can fix anything, Following God brings good luck, and It’s always wrong to judge.

Today we’re looking at spiritual urban legend number 5.

I. The Myth: Death Always Leads To A Better Place

Why is it that we often dance around that inconvenient truth of eternal punishment? Maybe it’s because we have a hard time coming to grips with the concepts of God’s justice and His judgment of sin.

Turn with me to Genesis 2 pg. 4

Genesis is the book of beginnings, which is why we repeatedly go back there to get our bearings.

In the first two chapters we find the creation account. We also see the one prohibition that the Creator laid down for the man and woman. **Read vs 16-17**

That was the command. It was straightforward and unambiguous. Don't eat the fruit because if you do you will suffer divine judgment.

Now look at chapter 3. Read vs 1-4

The very first lie in all of recorded history is here in verse 4. It was spoken by Satan to the woman and look what it is. There's no consequence for sin. There's no judgment for disobedience.

In fact, **verse 5 read**

Not only is there no punishment for disobedience there's actually a reward! You get to experience the things God is trying to hold back from you.

Now here we are 6000 years later and Satan hasn't changed his strategy from day one. His message is still, "You shall not surely die. Be your own master. Make your own decisions. Experience life to the fullest. There are no consequences. There is no judgment."

Now Satan has carried out his strategy and propagated his message in various ways. But one of the most effective tools he's used is the vehicle of language.

If you can get people to laugh at, trivialize, joke about, sin you can bring them to the point where they no longer take things seriously.

And today in our supposed enlightened Western society that's exactly what's happened with weighty biblical concepts like hell and damnation.

Words like "hell" and "damn" that are so pregnant with meaning have become trite trivial jokes to the average person.

How many times a day do you hear those words used outside the context of their biblical meaning?

When you poll Americans on religious beliefs most believe in God and heaven and hell. But most Americans don't expect to experience Hell first-hand. According to a Barna Research Poll from 2003 just one-half of 1% expect to go to Hell upon their death. Nearly two-thirds of Americans (64%) believe they will go to Heaven. One in 20 adults (5%) claim they will come back as another life form, while the same proportion (5%) contend they will simply cease to exist.

Even though most Americans believe in life after death and the existence of the soul, not everyone is clear about their own ultimate destination. One in every four adults (24%) admitted that they have "no idea" what will happen after they die.

Think about that. The most important question of all, what about eternity, and most people don't really have a clue.

Is hell real? Is there a literal place of eternal damnation awaiting those who refuse God's plan of salvation?

I. The Myth: Death Always Leads To A Better Place

II. The Reality: The Bible Clearly Says There Is A Hell

According to the Bible God is not only a God who is the very essence of love, but He's also a righteous God who tramples out the winepress of the fierceness of His wrath.

Our problem is that somehow we think those two things are mutually exclusive. We wonder, how could a God of love create an eternal hell? It's like those two things are mutually exclusive.

In the past 150 years or so our country has given rise to some very powerful, religious groups that deny a literal hell in the sense of everlasting punishment. You have Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Science, Seventh Day Adventists, Scientology, New Age Mysticism. These groups add up to millions and millions of followers.

From the cults, to secularists, to liberal Christianity, and even some Christians, the reality of an eternal hell has been relegated to a myth.

Well, let's take a look at the Bible and see what the scriptures have to say.

We want to begin to answer the question on the reality of hell by defining some terms.

Different translations will handle these words in different ways but let me give you statistics from the translation we're using, the New King James Version.

The word "hell" is found 32 times in the Bible. Nineteen in the Old Testament and 13 in the new.

All of the Old Testament references are a translation of the Hebrew word *sheol* which simply

means “the place where the dead go.”

Sometimes *sheol* refers to the grave and it’s translated that way. Other times it refers to the place where the soul goes.

Even the soul of Jesus went there after His death on the cross. **Turn to Psalm 16 page 487 Read vs 9-10.**

Acts chapter 2 in the New Testament lets us know that that’s a specific prophecy of Jesus.

That’s why the Apostle’s Creed has the line, *He descended into hell*.

There were 2 separate aspects to *sheol*. Part is for the righteous dead and part for the unrighteous.

In the New Testament the Greek term for *sheol* is *hades*. In the Original King James Version *hades* was translated by the word “hell.” Since that caused a lot of confusion for people our newer translations just use the word “hades.” They just transliterated the word from Greek to English.

Hades is never used to designate the place of eternal punishment. It was always used to refer to the temporary place of the dead.

So before the cross the souls of everybody who died went to either the paradise side or the judgment side of *hades*.

Something changes though, at the resurrection of Christ. **Turn to Ephesians 4 page 1039 Read verses 7-10**

Jesus Christ descended into *hades* and then ascended into heaven after a bodily resurrection.

Associated with that ascension was leading “captivity captive.” From this time on the righteous dead would no longer go to *hades*. He took those who were there with him to heaven and since the cross to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. That means today *hades* (or *sheol*) is the home of the wicked dead only.

Except for one place, the word translated “hell” in the New King James New Testament is the word *gehenna*.

Gehenna was originally a Hebrew word meaning the valley of Hinnom. The valley of Hinnom was actually the garbage dump outside the city of Jerusalem.

They burned garbage and animal carcasses there. It was a constantly smoldering fire.

It was also the place early in their history where the Israelites joined the Canaanites in burning their first born children in sacrifice to the god Moloch. It was considered an accursed place both by God and man.

Gehenna is the word that Jesus used to describe a place of unending torment. It was the place where *Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.*

When we're referring to an eternal hell we're talking about *gehenna*. *Sheol* or *hades* for the wicked is described as a place of torment but it isn't described as eternal.

Here's what happens in the end. **Turn to Revelation 20 page 1102**

This is at the end of time as we know it. The only people left to be finally judged are those who haven't believed in Jesus Christ. If you don't have Christ as Savior you have to stand before God and be judged by your works.

When that happens everybody comes up short.

Read vs 11-15

Hades gives up the dead that are in it and ultimately the dead including hades itself is cast into *gehenna*.

Now listen. Some people read these verses and still want to argue that hell isn't real.

They say, "God is love. God is fair. There's no way that a God of love would send people into eternal punishment."

There's a lot of people who believe that what they believe will somehow be the truth.

Kind of "Whatever I believe to be true spiritually will be true. If I don't like hell I'll just refuse to believe in it and it won't exist."

Well, let me tell you. I don't like the concept of hell either. But my belief system isn't going to determine reality. I can jump off the Bay Bridge and earnestly and sincerely believe that I'm going to float down and gently land in the bay but that's not reality. It doesn't matter how sincerely I believe it, my belief doesn't determine reality.

Remember something. In 10 of the 11 times *gehenna* is used it falls from the lips of the gentle, compassionate, meek and mild Jesus.

When Jesus Christ was on earth he talked much more about hell than He did about heaven. People say, "We don't want to hear about judgment. We want to hear about the love of God. Give us the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount."

You know where the first two occurrences of the word *gehenna* are found? They come from the lips of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount!

The Bible clearly says there's a hell. Is hell real? Jesus says it is. The Bible says it is. It says that it's real, that it's a place, and that it's the ultimate end of everyone who refuses to believe that Jesus Christ is the only Savior.

What is hell like? I think that it's important to realize that the Bible is generally restrained in it's descriptions of hell. It never sensationalizes hell.

Most people's idea of hell doesn't really come from the Bible. It comes from Medieval artists and writers like Dante and Milton.

Let's just let the Bible speak for itself.

Matthew 5 Page 852 Read verses 29-30 Hell is so bad that if you could keep yourself from going there by maiming yourself it would be worth it.

Matthew 8:11-12 Hell is described as a place of torment and outer darkness.

Matthew 25:42 Notice hell is a place of everlasting fire but it wasn't made for humans. It was made for the Devil and his demons.

The only reason people end up in hell is because they follow the deception of Satan.

Matthew 25:46 hell is everlasting punishment.

Now go back with me one more time to **Revelation chapter 20 Page 1102 Read verse 10**

This is after this age has run it's course. It's after the seven year tribulation period. And it's after the 1000 year kingdom rule of Jesus Christ on earth.

Now Satan's cast into the lake of fire. But notice he's not alone. The beast and the false prophet are already there. In fact, according to Revelation 19:20 they were cast in before the

1000 year kingdom.

Six times in Revelation 20 John stresses the 1000 years. In verse 10 they're still there and they will be tormented forever. Then in verse 15 all those whose names are not written in the book of life are thrown in with them.

Listen please. If you didn't get anything else from this series on urban legends hear me now. Hell is real. It's just as real as heaven, it's just as real as Jesus Christ, and it's just as real as eternal life.

Hell isn't a joke. It isn't a place where people go to party and be with their friends. It's a place of loneliness, isolation, torment, and eternal regret.

We when we hear some one tell some one else to "Go to hell," it ought to crush us. When we hear someone say "God damn you, it ought to grip us.

God forbid that any of us can hear that kind of talk at work, or out on the street, or in the movies or TV and not be gripped by what's being said.

If it just becomes common place. If you can just tune it out like so much background noise then you've let Satan accomplish his purpose in you. Satan's purpose for this world is to so trivialize the truth of God's judgment that people will be blind to their need of Jesus Christ.

Satan's strategy for believers is to so anesthetize us to the realities of hell that we never see the importance of sharing our faith.

Hell is real. Hell is punishment and eternal damnation.

Now you say, "Ed, that's heavy stuff. If all that's true I need to know the way of escape. If hell is real I need to know how can I be saved from it?

I. The Myth: Death Always Leads To A Better Place

II. The Reality: The Bible Clearly Says There Is A Hell

III. The Response: The Bible Explains How To Avoid Hell

Let me read you a quote from a book called "Hell and Salvation" by Leslie Woodson.

"The coming of Jesus into the world and the death of Christ on the cross demands a recognition of man's terrible plight, his tragic fate.

Unless man was in desperate trouble which was of eternal consequences the coming of Christ and His crucifixion were of little significance. The keystone of our faith is the doctrine of hell, because without this truth there is no justifiable reason for the necessity of the cross and the urgency of the preaching of the gospel to the whole world. Unless there is an eternal hell the danger in which man exists is not grave enough to demand the sacrifice of God's own Son. The atonement means absolutely nothing without the fact of hell."

The truth of eternal punishment and damnation takes us right back to the cross.

The description of hell that emerges from Jesus' teaching is frightening. It's the most horrendous thing we can imagine.

But you know what? What happened at the cross is frightening and horrendous too. The problem is it's so hard for us to apprehend that, to get our head around it and really understand it.

A lot of people have died as martyrs. A lot of people have suffered unspeakable things. But no one in all of human history suffered like Jesus suffered.

A couple of months ago a German working on a Turkish translation of the Bible and two Turkish Christians met with 5 Muslim men who said they were interested in hearing more about the Bible. Instead the men tied the three up and tortured them for 3 long hours before finally killing them.

Susanne Geske the widow of the German made front page news all over Turkey when she told the press she didn't want revenge. She said, "Oh God, forgive them for they know not what they do."

One columnist wrote this about her comment, "She said in one sentence what 1,000 missionaries in 1,000 years could never do."

Those men suffered indescribable horrors, but they still didn't suffer like Jesus suffered.

Here's why-

God is absolutely holy. His holiness is true holiness. It's absolute perfection. When the prophet Isaiah saw a vision of God the Bible says he fell on his face and said, *"Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts."* Isaiah 6:5

To understand the severity of what happened at the cross we have to understand the overwhelming majesty and holiness of the living God.

When we compare ourselves with Him, then we see the seriousness of our sin.

God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. He's of purer eyes than to look upon sin. Isaiah was a godly man, but he was still an imperfect human being. That's why he cried out "Woe is me!"

All sin is an arrogant offence and a flagrant insult against our glorious Creator.

We are under an infinite obligation to obey God and God is under an infinite obligation, demanded by His holiness, to punish sin. That punishment is eternal hell.

That's all the bad news because if we had to stop at that point there'd be no hope for any of us.

But thank God, in the midst of the holiness and majesty and righteousness of God, God is also love. And in His love He made a provision for our salvation.

Here it is. God, who must punish sin with a holy wrath, punished His innocent Son in our place. On the cross Jesus took the holy wrath of the father for us.

II Corinthians 5:21 says He became sin for us!

The God who abhors our sin sent His Son to die for our sins. To suffer in our place. Jesus suffered for all the sins that have ever been committed and ever will be.

How can we escape the awful judgment of hell? How can we make sure that our death leads to a better place?

There's only one way. All the good works you could ever do, all the churchy religious stuff you could pull off couldn't pay for one sin.

It took the death of the sinless Son of God to do that. If we could get to heaven by our own good works then the death of Christ was the greatest travesty of justice that ever took place. In fact the Bible says, *if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain*. Galatians 2:21

The Good news is simply this; He died, was buried, and rose again for you. In your place. As your substitute. As the eternal One He suffered the pangs of an eternal hell for you.

Would you trust Him today? Will you believe? Will you bow your heart before the living God and humbly say, "Thank you for the amazing gift of Your Son?"

You know, hell is serious business. Sin is serious business. But God is serious too. He's serious about forgiveness. He's serious about salvation. He's serious about grace.

He's serious when He says, *Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.* II Corinthians 6:2

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Matthew 11:28