

Where the Hell? – June 21, 2015

by **David Green**

At a Christian church many years ago, I had been the minister there several months when one of the members wanted to meet with me. I could tell something was irritating him. When we met he said, “I come to church every Sunday. And not once have I heard you preach on hell. When are you going to say something about hell?”

I said, “Well, I guess I’m just not that into hell. But apparently you are, because you’re giving me hell right now.” He didn’t think it was very funny. He went on to say people needed to hear about hell – and specifically, to be warned about the danger of going to hell – because that was the church’s job. Avoiding hell and going to heaven was the whole point, after all.

I told him I respectfully had a difference of opinion about that being the whole point of the Christian faith, but I promised I would do a sermon about hell if that would make him happy. So I did, and gave it the title, “The Sermon From Hell.” It looked great on the church sign out by the road. And it drew a big crowd, so for a minute I thought, “Gee, that guy is right. People do want to hear about hell.”

But I disappointed that man, and a few others. Rather than giving the hellfire and damnation sermon he was hoping for, I talked instead about how the concept of hell had been misunderstood and misused over the years to frighten people. I said I couldn’t personally reconcile the concept of a loving, gracious God with that same God creating a place of eternal torment for those who didn’t believe in him or who had never heard of him. And that any faith based on fear, or on how to save your own soul in the afterlife, was selfish and not worth believing in.

I thought I stood an even chance of getting fired that day. But to my surprise, the majority of people who attended came out of church with comments like, “Thank you for saying out loud what I already thought.” Or, “I hope you’re right.” The few who found my sermon objectionable – including that man – eventually transferred their membership to another church, where I can only suppose the atmosphere was much more hellish, and to their liking.

That was years ago, but hell apparently continues to hold a fascination for many people. Avoiding hell still motivates folks to get religion, try to behave, and go to church.

On the other hand, a growing number of people are dispensing with hell altogether. They find the whole idea unnecessary.

Just to be clear, I don’t believe in a place called hell. If you don’t either, or if you’ve ever wondered, “Where in the hell did the idea of hell come from?” we can trace it back to four things:

1. Ancient mythology that found its way into the Bible;
2. Metaphors and allegories in the Bible that have been taken literally;
3. Popular fiction: the first part of Dante Alighieri’s epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*, called *Inferno*, published 1320, and John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, published in 1678; and maybe most importantly and sadly,
4. The need for established religion to control people.

There are two ways of dispensing with the idea of hell. One is to simply reject Christianity or any other religion where hell is part of the real estate. Just have nothing more to do with it because you think hell is a dumb idea.

The other way is to actually read the Bible seriously – not literally – but seriously. And there's a big difference. From the literal point of view, the Bible was written directly by God, or by people who were taking dictation from God. So, even though the Bible contains scientific and other factual errors and contradictions, it is still perfect because God is perfect.

On the other hand, from a serious point of view, the Bible is a diverse collection of 66 books, or 73 books if you're a Catholic. Each book is composed in a unique style or literary genre, written at different times in history, by different authors with different perspectives and agendas, and for different audiences.

When you see it that way, it isn't necessary to take the Bible literally. It's okay to question it or disagree with it. And just because you question or disagree with something in the Bible, unless you've been taught otherwise, that should not mean you can no longer be a true Christian or your faith is diminished in any way.

For Pete's sake, plenty of faithful Christians have been questioning the Bible for centuries – including a lot of Unitarians and Universalists, as well as Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Catholics, Baptists – you name it – and it's high time for everyone to grow up and realize taking the Bible seriously is perfectly okay.

So, when you take the Bible seriously, it's only natural when you come across a concept like hell, you investigate where in the hell that came from.

When you do that, it becomes clear that a literal hell does not exist. For one thing, when it appears at all in the Bible, hell is rarely described the same way twice. And, the original words translated into modern languages as hell – when you read them in the Hebrew or Greek of the Bible – can mean different things, and were not referring to the hell we've all come to know and love.

For instance, the ancient Jews who wrote the Hebrew scriptures – or the Old Testament – did not seem to care that much about the afterlife.

Generally speaking, when someone died, Jews believed their spirit went to a place called Sheol. It was thought to be a kind of underworld, neither a place of reward or punishment. You just hung out there as kind of a shadow of your former self.

By the time Jesus was born, Jews had suffered under the rule of the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. Not surprisingly, many of them developed apocalyptic beliefs where God would rescue them and torment their oppressors. At the same time they embraced – from those same oppressors – the dualistic idea of an underworld ruled by malevolent gods, and a paradise ruled by righteous gods. Or in the case of the Jews, the one God.

Some concepts also had to do with bad spirits who roamed *this* world – demons or devils. In a pre-scientific world, demons could explain why bad things happened to people for no apparent reason.

And the idea of demons fit in well with an existing Jewish character – or more accurately – a character trait, called Satan. In the Hebrew scriptures, Satan is shorthand for an accuser, an adversary or an opponent. Someone who stands in your way or trips you up. More often than not, Satan was not a particular *being*, but more a *way of being*.

Someone giving me a hard time was being a Satan. Anyone who eats the last of the ice cream is a Satan. In any event, Satan had nothing to do with the afterlife, but this life.

In the New Testament, we're told Jesus was tempted by a mysterious Satan, and on another day when Jesus got mad at one of his own disciples, Peter, he called him Satan. But again, there's no connection there between a place called hell and a guy named Satan.

At one point, Jesus does make a reference to a place called Gehenna, and in many translations of the Bible and in many Christian traditions, that's translated as hell. It's a perfect example of people who came much later, who had by that time developed an idea of hell, assuming Jesus must've been referring to hell. When in fact, he wasn't.

Gehenna was an actual, physical place, located just outside the city walls of Jerusalem. It was a huge, constantly smoldering trash dump that smelled horrible. And Jesus basically tells folks Gehenna is a place you want to avoid. No kidding.

Some of the most vivid images of hell come from the Book of Revelation. We don't have time to get into Revelation today, but it describes a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil at the end of time. It borrows a lot of imagery – some of it rather frightening – from a variety of myth and metaphor.

So Revelation added pieces to this emerging idea of hell, and hell being ruled by not any old Satan, but a distinct personality named Satan. When you read Revelation in it's historical context, it's obvious the author was really referring not to the ruler of hell, but to the Emperor of Rome, who was busy persecuting Christians and Jews.

But as time went on, that allegorical connection was lost or ignored. What was originally allegorical was taken as literal. Because a literal threat to your soul is far more powerful than an allegory. Christians turned hell into a place of eternal damnation.

And believe it or not, they also borrowed from Islam. Muslims had developed their own beliefs about an afterlife where bad people were chained up and tossed into a fiery abyss. This combined threat was used to great effect to keep people in line as the church became more powerful.

However, hell as we know it truly became cemented in the minds of people through popular literature. In 1320, Dante wrote the epic poem, *The Divine Comedy* as a three part, scathing condemnation of the politics of medieval Italy. The first section is *Inferno*. He ruthlessly skewered ancient and contemporary people he disagreed with, borrowing images and characters from a variety of sources to paint an unforgettable picture of hell where the folks Dante hated were punished for their crimes.

The Divine Comedy was a huge hit. It's always fun to read about the suffering of people you hate. Even though it was condemned by the church at the time, it was so widely read over the centuries, it took on it's own life and was integrated into church teaching and preaching.

The second major literary contribution to hell came about 350 years later, in 1678, when John Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It tells the story of a devout Christian who's on a long and tortured quest to unburden himself from

sin. In a subtle move, Bunyon gave him the name “Christian,” and he sets off from his hometown and endures many twists and turns and dangers. He’s taunted by doubts, temptations, desires, fears, and shame.

He’s led astray by characters like Mr. Worldy Wiseman, and Civility, and Mr. Legality, who tell Christian to trust in laws and ethics and morality that have nothing to do with faith in Christ.

Christian’s ultimate goal is to reach the Celestial City, but first he must endure all kinds of horrible things. He passes by a lake of fire and does battle with an evil dragon-like creature named Apollyon. In other words, Satan. He finally makes it to Celestial City, still carrying his burden of sin.

The point of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* was that it’s not easy being a Christian. Most agree it was written as a smack in the face to Catholics, who by comparison provided a somewhat more straightforward way to salvation. Trust in the church, and you’re in.

The Pilgrim’s Progress is so popular, it’s never been out of print. It had a huge influence on the Puritans, and on every subsequent Christian movement emphasizing sin as ever-present and salvation as never a sure thing. The world is full of all kinds of temptations and traps, and fighting the forces of evil and suffering your way through it is the only way to keep a pure heart and – just maybe – avoid hell and struggle into heaven.

It’s no accident the same message is preached every Sunday in so many churches.

Because fear sells. The fear of hell. Of course, the flip side of fear is hope. That two-sided coin of fear and hope is the bait *and* the control mechanism. In that kind of theology, you can’t have hope without fear. Hope by itself would be too easy, because otherwise – the thinking goes – why would anyone be compelled to be good or ethical, if not for fear of being punished.

I believe and hope we are well beyond that way of thinking. And it seems a growing number of people in general are also tired of it.

We know, because we live it every day, that hope alone – believing in good for goodness sake – is more than enough. And we can tell hell where to go.