

After Life sermon series
Hell - Matthew 25:31-46
Feb. 1, 2026
Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

This is a first for me...and maybe a last. I've never preached that has a PG-13 rating. Kids, please put on your earmuffs. In this sermon, I will say the word "Hell" 38 times. That's a lot of times saying the word "Hell" – that's the second time. But I promise I will not be too gratuitous in my usage. I will admit I do let the youth in the Pastor's Class say this word, as long as they use it appropriately. Amazingly, they always find all kinds of questions to ask about it. And I won't be like my friend Brian, who preached a whole sermon series on Hell, with the sermons titled "What in the Hell," "Why in the Hell," Who in the Hell," and finally, "Hell, No!" No one wants to hear about Hell that much.

Actually, Brian's excellent work on this topic is partly why I want to preach this sermon. What happens after we die is one of the most common topics with which people come to me, and you can't talk about that without talking about Hell. Another inspiration for me was a book co-authored by my preaching professor, Ron Allen, titled "Second Thoughts on Hell," in which he does a deep dive on the biblical foundations, cultural manifestations, and theological consequences of a theology on Hell. The concept of Hell is such an ingrained part of our society, and yet we often ascribe biblical or theological meaning to it that stretches the bounds of what we actually know. My goal in this sermon is not to tell you what to believe about Hell, but to give you the tools you need to figure out for yourself how this concept fits into what you believe about what happens when we die.

So, let's dive right in, starting as we should with the Bible. The English word "hell" appears in the Bible several times, but the meaning of the word varies from context to context, and it is translated for several different Hebrew and Greek words. As they say, the devil is in the details. For example, ancient Israelites had no concept of Hell, but they did talk about Sheol, which appears over 60 times in the Hebrew scriptures. Sheol is depicted as a bleak, gloomy netherworld – think the Upside Down from "Stranger Things," if you know that show – where the dead – both righteous and unrighteous – spend an eternity in ghost-like shades of nothingness. But unlike modern concepts of Hell, there's no torment or punishment. It's just an eternal holding cell for everyone.

As we move to the Second Testament, we get a couple of words that point down to the underworld. The first is Hades, a familiar term to those who know Greek mythology or read the Percy Jackson books or saw Disney's "Hercules." Hades appears 10 times in scripture and reflects the Greco-Roman cultural influence on the Bible. The books of the Second Testament were written in the context of Greek culture, customs, and language, so it makes sense that a concept like Hades seeps in. Hades was both the Greek god of the underworld and the place he resided. In Hades, the dead waited for their fate to be determined, so it's taking the concept of Sheol and seasons it with the concept of judgment that Hades would pronounce on the dead.

The third biblical term translated "Hell" is Gehenna, which appears seven times. It comes from the Hebrew word Ge-hinnom, which means Valley of Hinnom, which was located just outside of Jerusalem. Hundreds of years before Jesus, this valley was used for all kinds of immoral cultic rituals, including sacrificing children by burning them alive. By Jesus' time, the valley had become a garbage dump, a perpetual fire where trash was burned.

So, in summary, in the Bible we have three concepts of Hell. Sheol – a drab, lifeless place. Hades – a holding cell for the dead awaiting judgment from Hades. Gehenna – a fiery garbage dump incinerator. In each of these you can hear echoes of our modern portraits of hell, but you also recognize that a lot of things are missing, like the devil with the pitchfork and the eternal torment of souls.

From these words and their meanings, our Christian ancestors have cultivated four composite depictions of Hell. I'm going to lay them out for you and let you decide which one speaks most to you. Of, if you're like me, you may take a little bit of this one and a little bit of that one. My understanding of Hell has changed drastically over time, which I see as one of the ways our faith grows. We're never meant to stay the same, but to keep thinking, talking, reading, and praying as our faith evolves. What did you believe about Hell as a kid? What do you believe now?

The first depiction of Hell is the literal one, an actual place presided over by Satan in which persons who rebel against God are tormented for their sins in eternal flames. This is the one favored by Gary Larson, creator of the Far Side cartoons. In one of them, titled "Aerobics in Hell," the devil says to a group of exercisers, "Three more...two more...one more...good! Now, five million jumping jacks...and one...and two..." The literal view was most famously presented in Dante's Inferno and still lives on today in the form of "hellfire and damnation" Christianity and the "Left Behind" book series. For many people, not only is it the most familiar interpretation of Hell, it's the only one they've ever heard and it motivates their faith. As one bumper sticker says, "Eternity: Do you want smoking or non-smoking?" That's some solid populist theology right there.

But that's not the only understanding of Hell. Another is the metaphorical interpretation. Proponents of this view believe that the images of Hell in the Bible don't describe a real place but instead point to a deeper meaning. For example, fire consumes and destroys, like what unrepentant sin does to our hearts. To be cast into the outer darkness means to be in lonely isolation away from God's love. Eternal punishment isn't meted out by God but is the consequence of selfish action that separates us from God's presence. Hell is not someplace we go, but a state of being we bring on ourselves by our choices.

Others have put forth the annihilist view of Hell, from the word "annihilation." For this view, there is no eternal fire of conscious torment like the literal view or the solitary confinement of the metaphorical view. For the annihilist, there's just...nothing. When life is over, it's over. Think of cremation with no hope of resurrection. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Jesus says in John 3, "For God so loved the world that he sent his only son so that those who believe will not perish but have eternal life." For annihilists, perishing means annihilation. Eternal death. The end.

The final view on Hell is called universal salvation, which actually rejects the existence of Hell in the first place. Believers of this view say that simply cannot fathom that God would be OK with being separate from God's children for eternity. Like Jesus' parable of pursuing the lost sheep, God will chase after us for eternity until our "No" to God becomes a "Yes" and we are welcomed into God's kingdom. Can you imagine your child ever doing something so heinous that you would give up on them forever? That's the way universalists view God. If God is love and we are offered forgiveness through Christ, then God will never stop seeking reconciliation until, as Paul says in Philippians, "Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

So, there you have it. Literal. Metaphorical. Annihilist. Universal salvation. Four very different ways of understanding Hell. So, where do you land? I reject the literalist view. Jesus

often spoke in hyperbole and metaphor, so I don't believe he or other authors in the Bible were talking about a literal physical location "down there." There is where you have to factor in the influence of Gehenna. I also don't like this view because historically it's been used to scare people into having faith, and I don't believe that's how God wants us to come to belief. I don't want to believe in Jesus just to avoid Hell.

I also reject the annihilist view, because I believe we are eternal beings and I can't bring myself to believe in a God who would destroy us forever, no matter how bad our sins and rebellion. And the idea of eternally ending someone's existence for bad decisions they made while on earth flies in the face of the idea of biblical justice and reconciliation.

The idea of universal salvation is most intriguing to me. It fits best with my view of God as a parent, someone who won't give up on me even if I give up on myself. I find comfort in the idea that Jesus would descend into the living Hell we create for ourselves and rescue us from our own sins. I would like to think that God will continue pursuing everyone out of the indescribable and unending love God has for each of us.

But we can't factor out the importance of free will in all of us, and that's where the metaphorical view comes into play for me. People will continue to say "No" to God, even after they die. And then, as my friend David Shirey writes, "God will honor their stubborn free will, albeit reluctantly, and leave them alone." C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Hell is the greatest monument to human freedom." If some people choose not to choose God, I believe God will honor their choice. I believe that starts while we're here on earth, when we make choices that separate us from God's love and mercy, and continues after our earthly bodies give out. If there is a Hell, people are there because they choose to be there, not because God put them there.

Ultimately, who the heck knows, right? I sure don't. But I do know this. We worship a God whose love is not about condemnation, but about grace and reconciliation. As John writes in one of his letters, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." It's really easy to threaten people with whom you disagree with the idea they're going to Hell if they don't change their ways, and we always draw that line just in front of us. But where we seek to separate, God seeks to reconcile. If, as Paul promises in Romans, that nothing can separate us from the love of God, then I don't believe God is going to eternally condemn us. God's eternal desire is to reconcile with us, show to us definitely on the cross. Jesus died so that we would know and choose God's love over our own sin. I don't believe God ever gives up on any of God's children. May we have the same grace for others and for ourselves that God has for us.