

9-14-25 Sermon: “That’s Not in the Bible!: If You Don’t Believe in Jesus, You’ll Go to Hell”

Today is the last Sunday of a sermon series called “*That’s Not in the Bible!*” And today’s unbiblical phrase is one you’ve surely heard before, whether shouted by a televangelist or posted on a roadside billboard: “If you don’t believe in Jesus, you’ll go to hell.”

Now, this one’s a little more complicated than our other unbiblical aphorisms because there’s several different pieces. So let’s start with our modern-day conceptions about heaven and hell.

Christians tend to think of heaven and hell as places we go when we die. Or more specifically, places our *souls* go. Christian popular lore teaches that when a person dies, the body dies but the soul lives on. And that soul goes to one of two places: Up to heaven, where we live with God forever. Or down to hell – eternal damnation and separation from God.

And there’s nothing inherently *wrong* with these beliefs. But friends, I do have some news for you: None of that is in the Bible.

Now, remember the two important caveats from when we started this series: Number 1: Just because something’s not in the Bible doesn’t mean it’s not true. And number 2: Just because something *is* in the Bible does not mean that it *is* true! So if that conception of heaven and hell works for you – go with it. But since we proclaim that the Bible is a primary source of knowledge about God, we do need to understand what it actually says about heaven, hell, death, and the afterlife.

The problem is: there’s not one answer. Instead, the Bible offers us a series of contradictory teachings about what happens after we die.

Let’s start at the beginning. For most of the Old Testament, there is no concept of an afterlife. We hear – in today’s reading from Isaiah, and in the Psalms – about a place called Sheol, the Pit, the Dead. But that’s not hell; it’s more like Hades from Greek mythology. Sheol is the underworld, a neutral place and state of being into which the dead go, never to return.

There’s no consensus among the many authors of the Old Testament as to whether or not we are conscious in Sheol. Do we continue to exist as spiritual beings, or do we just return to the earth, dust to dust?

But as we get to the end of the Old Testament period and into the New Testament, a new concept emerges, something a bit closer to our modern-day notion of hell. And it is called “Gehenna.”

Gehenna began as real neighborhood in Jerusalem; it’s also called the Valley of Hinnom. And Old Testament traditions say that some pretty bad things went on in Gehenna: worship of foreign gods, maybe even involving child sacrifice. So over time, Gehenna became a figure of speech and then a spiritual concept – a place where the wicked go to be punished. However, in *some* rabbinic literature, Gehenna is actually more like purgatory than hell – the wicked go there for a period of time after death to atone for their sins.

In our English Bibles, when we hear Jesus talking about hell – or as this morning’s reading called it, “the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” – Gehenna is what he’s referring to.

So, the wicked might go to hell – jury’s still out on that – but heaven in the Bible is *very* different from modern-day conceptions. We talk about our bodies dying and our souls going to heaven, but y’all that’s Plato, not Jesus. What Jesus and the early Christians believed in was something called *resurrection of the body*.

Resurrection of the body says that when we die, we're dead, period. But in the Last Day, God will raise us from the dead – *in our bodies* – and we will live with God right here on earth.

Again, the Greeks gave us dualism – body bad, soul good – but Hebrew cosmology envisions God's creation more holistically. After all, God created the world and called it good, and God created our bodies in God's own image. So heaven – eternal paradise – can't be some faraway, esoteric place inhabited by holy souls; rather, in the words of renowned saint and Go-Go Belinda Carilisle, "Heaven is a place on earth." And we go there in our bodies, as our whole, messy selves.

The early Christians believed that the resurrection of Jesus Christ inaugurated this New Day, this resurrection of the body. Jesus, Paul writes, is the first fruits of the resurrection; Christ has been raised; and we, too, one day will be raised. Instead of waiting until the end of time, in Jesus Christ, God has *already* begun inaugurating the Kingdom of God – the Kingdom of Heaven – right here, right now, on earth as it is in heaven. So that, even as the world is still fallen and Sin still reigns, God is also present right here on earth, dwelling with God's people.

In Jesus Christ, God has invaded this world with heaven. So powers of sin, death, and evil, you've been put on notice. God, in Christ, will have the last word.

So, heaven and hell are a little different than we thought. Ok. Now what does the Bible say about this tricky little thing called belief.

Unsurprisingly, there are contradictions, but the general consensus is that, rather than the righteous being saved and the wicked being damned, Jesus offers all people access to salvation. For we are all both righteous and wicked, and none of us can achieve perfect righteousness on our own. And I'm great with that – the Calvinist in me loves it! – but here's where Christian pop culture part ways. I *don't* think the Bible supports the argument that we access salvation through believing certain things about Jesus.

Y'all have heard me go on and on about Greek prepositions before. Like in Paul's letter to the Romans – are we saved by grace through faith *in* Christ or through the faithfulness *of* Christ? The Greek is not clear.

But the preposition I want to carry on about today is *through*. As in John 3:17 – you see it in today's call to worship – "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that world might be saved *through* him." Or John 14:6, when Jesus says, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except *through* me."

I wonder. I wonder when we decided that we understand exactly how that works. I wonder who figured out that *through me* means, "You must believe that Jesus Christ is the biological Son of God who died and rose again for your sins, accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and invite him to live in your heart where he shall therefore purge you of your worldly ways." I just...I personally don't hear all that when I hear the word "through."

Likewise, I wonder who decided that, in John 3:16 (also in the call to worship), the Greek verb *pisteoun* means "believes in and assents to certain intellectual propositions about Jesus" rather than "has faith in" Jesus...which, I would argue, is a much more robust and more accurate verb choice.

I just wonder how we took such a great and mysterious concept as the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ in order to save the whole world! – and turned it into a checklist of propositions to believe. Because in doing so, we have created a faith that is formulaic, sanitized, and kind of anemic. Simpler, maybe. But without all the good stuff.

Because in that same Gospel – with “the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” and John 3:16 – there is also John 10:16, where Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

Which makes me think that Jesus is telling us that maybe we don’t have it all figured out. And maybe it’s not our job to judge, and condemn, and send people to a hell that may or may not exist.

Maybe our job instead, friends, is to follow in the footsteps of that Good Shepherd and lay down our lives – pour out our whole selves – for all of God’s beloved sheep. Amen.