

SMOKING OR NON-SMOKING?

Part I

Remember years ago when you went into a restaurant and the waitress would greet you as you came in and ask you if you would like to head to the “Smoking” or “Non-Smoking” section of the restaurant to eat? But while the question is no longer relevant in restaurants today, it still remains the most important question of all from an eternal perspective—because the **smoking** and **non-smoking** that I will be talking about concerns the place you’ll be staying for the rest of eternity. The commitments that you make in this life, and the way you live your life in response to those commitments, will directly affect whether you end up in the **Smoking** or the **Non-Smoking** sections—in a very real and literal eternal sense. ***Smoking or Non-smoking? Heaven or Hell?—which will it be?***

It amazes me that when you ask some Christians what they think about Hell, they will usually start by saying something like, “Well, in ***my opinion*** . . . yadah, yadah, yadah.” And then they reel off some fanciful notions about Hell being a metaphor for a dreary afterlife—kinda like a bad day at the office. And then they’ll cap off their little discussion the way they began by concluding, “*And well, that’s just the way that I see it.*” To all of which, I like to say, “***Well, who cares the way you see it?!***” ***What possible link to reality does your dreamed up opinion have?***” (You might think that, but don’t say it out loud because if you do, then you are buying a ticket to a smoking convention in eternity. God’s Word tells us to respond to such silly notions “***with gentleness and respect***”¹—not with impatience and rudeness.) But, how would you respond if someone were interested in Christianity—how would you describe Heaven or Hell to them? Would you rely upon mere opinion? Or maybe something you read in a magazine, saw on-line, or viewed in a Hollywood movie? Well, I hope not because the only true informational source on what Hell is really like comes from the Bible—and it has plenty to tell us about Hell and what those who end up there will experience. And so, for the next few weeks, I want to delve deeply into God’s Word to give you what it has to tell us about Heaven, Hell and what happens to people in the first 30 seconds after they die. And it is not like the Scriptures are silent of these matters. They give us ample information about each of these topics, and we need to know what they say so that we can accurately and confidently respond to those who have their own personal, yet misguided, opinions on life after death—whether it be **smoking** or **non-smoking**.

For our purposes this morning, we’ll start with the “**smoking section**”—the one called Hell. And, I’d like for you to consider two simple questions concerning this place:

1. The first question, and the most logical place to start, would be to ask: “Is there really a place called **Hell**?”
2. And the second question is this: If there is a Hell, then what is it like?

Now, answering these questions is not just an academic exercise. We are not pursuing this simply for informational purposes. At the end, I hope that your reaction won’t merely be, “*Oh, that’s nice to know.*” Rather, what we will be covering is essential to our faith. This is not only a discussion of what we believe, but why it is important to both our relationship with God, as well as our relationship with our fellow man. So, let’s get started with that first question.

[QUESTION NO. 1:] “Is there a Hell?” When we go to the Bible, it does not waffle on this issue at all. Both the Old Testament and the New clearly affirm that, yes, there is a very real place called Hell. There are so many passages that tell us this, and I have cited a number of them in this morning’s handout², but in the interest of time, I am going to give you a representative verse from each part of the Bible. For example, in the Old Testament, David tells us in the Book of Psalms that, without a doubt: “The wicked shall be **SENT AWAY TO HELL**; this is the fate of all the nations forgetting the Lord.” Psalm 9:17 (TLB) And, if we turn to the New Testament to find a verse telling us about the reality of Hell, there is no better source than from the lips of the One who knows all things about both Heaven and Hell. And in this regard, Jesus warns: “And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be **THROWN INTO HELL.**” Matthew 5:30 (NLT2)

Now, the actual Hebrew word for “**Hell**” used by David in that verse from Psalms translates literally as “**Sheol**”—as Hell is often referred to in the Old Testament. But, in the New Testament, the Greek word that is used is “*gehenna*” or even “*Hades*”—and, for the most part, it is safe to say that those two Greek words mean Hell. I’ll have a little more to say in another sermon in this series about the difference between these three words, **Sheol**, **Gehenna** and **Hades**, as compared to the “**lake of fire**”³ that is referred to in the Book of Revelation—because there is an important distinction dealing with what happens to lost souls between the time that they die and the time of Final Judgment on Judgment Day. But for our purposes this morning, let’s just keep it simple and note that whatever translation of the Bible you may have-- **Sheol**, **Gehenna** and **Hades** are all basically referring to “**Hell**”. And with that being the case, you can clearly see that both King David and the King of Kings, Jesus Himself declared, without question, that **THERE IS DEFINITELY A PLACE FOR THE WICKED CALLED HELL**. So that gets us past the first question and we can move on to the second one.

QUESTION NO. 2: “What is Hell like?” Is it a place where sinners temporarily reside after death—sort of like the notion about purgatory? That’s what our Catholic friends believe. They contend that this place or state called purgatory is where sinners temporarily go for a little re-processing before they are allowed entry into Heaven. While in purgatory, they are purged by fires of varying intensity depending upon just how deeply stained one is by sin. And once they are re-processed accordingly, they leave this temporary abode and are ready to enter into Heaven upon the general resurrection of the dead. That is one notion of a temporary Hell.

But, that is not the only view that argues Hell is not a permanent thing, because there are other people—Jehovah Witnesses⁴, for example—who claim that Hell is temporary in the sense that wicked souls are completely destroyed there. In other words, they believe that when lost sinners die they simply cease to exist. To put it another way, they are *consumed by the fires of Hell into nothingness* and **totally annihilated**. In response to these misguided views of the Catholics and Jehovah Witnesses, let me just say that if you happen to entertain either of these notions that Hell is only a **temporary punishment**, then think again. Why?—because the Bible clearly teaches that there is **nothing temporary about Hell**. It is a place in which its inhabitants will experience a **never-ending, eternal existence**. In fact, Jesus describes Hell as a place of “**eternal punishment**.”⁵ In Jude 7, it refers to Hell as “the **eternal fire** of God’s judgment.”⁶ The Book of Revelation tells us that those in Hell “will be tormented **day and night forever and ever**.”⁷ There is nothing temporary about those passages of Scripture. And so, our Catholic brethren who cling to the idea of purgatory, as well as those who would call themselves annihilationists—they are expressing mere opinions that are wholly contradicted by God’s Word. The truth is that if you end up in the **smoking section**, you’ll be there for all eternity.

Well, if a lost person’s stay in Hell is forever, then what will they experience there for all of eternity? This question reminds me a conversation that I had with my great-uncle who had landed at Utah Beach on D-Day during World War II. I asked him what his experience was like during that awful landing. He didn’t seem to want to answer, but finally said in a low voice, barely above a whisper: “**It was Hell**.” And when I pressed him for a little more detail, he wouldn’t give an answer. The horrors were just too great to stir back up in his mind, and his only comment was: “**You just wouldn’t want to be there**.” That is exactly how the Bible describes Hell. Its horrors almost defy description. And yet, God’s Word emphasizes repeatedly one major characteristic of Hell—it is a place of **fiery** punishment.⁸ But, apparently what the Bible is describing is a torment that goes beyond anything mere flames could cause. You see, normally, fire is associated with flames that **give off light**. Yet, even so, Hell is also described in multiple Scriptures as a place of great **darkness**.⁹

So how can it be both of place of light and darkness at the same time? Is this a contradiction? No, the Bible is authoritative; it doesn't contradict itself. So how can there be a place of raging fires with no light at all? When you come across something like this in the Scriptures, and it appears difficult to reconcile, give it extra study. Because nine times out of ten, God is trying to tell us something extremely important—and so, He wants us to focus on it and think about it. And that is what we have here—the Scriptures are trying to communicate something crucial to us about the nature of punishment in Hell. And, it does this by describing Hell as both a place of *fiery flames* and *utter darkness*.

So think about it—when you were a small child, what was one of the things that frightened you the most? I don't know about you, but *darkness* was pretty high on my list of things to stay away from. And for those who have an extreme fear of night or darkness, a psychologist would say that they suffer from a phobia known as *nyctophobia*. And this condition is a terrible thing that can cause intense and harrowing symptoms that read like something from a horror movie. For example, those who have nyctophobia are plagued by one or more of the following—**listen to this terrible list**: Trouble breathing, racing heart rate, chest tightness or pain, shaking, trembling, or tingling sensations, lightheadedness or dizziness, upset stomach, hot or cold flashes, sweating, overwhelming feelings of anxiety or panic, an intense need to escape the situation, detachment from self or feeling “unreal,” losing control or feeling insane, feeling like you may lose consciousness, and feelings of powerlessness over your fears.¹⁰ Wow!—just having a couple of those symptoms would be terrible. But, how would you like to experience all of those things, all at once, all of the time, for the rest of eternity? That is what Jesus is trying to get across to us when He describes Hell as a place of darkness—it is that horrible.

Now, if you suffer from nyctophobia, then you can go to a doctor or psychologist and they can point you in the right direction for a cure. But, if you happen to be heading on a road to the *smoking section*, this [pointing to the Bible]—along with prayer and repentance—is the only cure. And if you wait too long and die, and actually end up *in* that *smoking section*, then it will simply be too little too late, and there is no cure.

So, when God's Word describes the *fires of hell* and its *total darkness*, it indicates a kind of indescribable torment that no one has ever experienced on this side of eternity. It is a torment mixed with constant fear and anxiety that burns and consumes body, mind and soul. Hell is such a terrible place. It's like my uncle said, “*You just wouldn't want to be there.*”

There is another description of Hell that Jesus gives us that is often over looked. He describes Hell as the *place of worms*. Referring to the lost souls in Hell, Jesus says that “the worms that eat them never die, and the fire that burns them is never put out.”¹¹ Now what's that all about?—this reference

to “worms” in Hell? Well, that’s where the Greek word *gehenna* that I mentioned earlier comes into play. Jesus used *gehenna* when he referred to Hell. Why did He choose that word? The word “*gehenna*” refers to the Valley of Hinnom located outside of Jerusalem. It had a dark and terrible history. During Old Testament times, it was a horrible place in which unfaithful Israelites slaughtered their own children as sacrifices to the pagan god, Molech. (See: 2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31; 32:35.) As time passed, this valley became basically a garbage and sewage dump for the City of Jerusalem. The valley was filled with the stench of smoke from the constantly burning trash. Its rotting and decaying wastes were filled with worms, or actually maggots, that fed upon the filth of this valley. And so, Jesus used the word *gehenna* to refer to this worm infested, fiery place to symbolize the punishment awaiting those condemned to Hell. And, take note that by saying that the worms “*never die*” and the fire “*never goes out*,” Jesus is again emphasizing the *eternal nature* of Hell—again, *it ain’t temporary!*¹² And so, the torment is both external as the “*flames*” inflict pain on the spiritual body outwardly, while the “*worms*” cause the soul suffering inwardly.

Elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus appears to suggest that this inward pain is both *emotional* and *psychological* when He describes Hell as being a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”¹³ Here, Jesus is expressing the utter sorrow and deep regret that one’s imprisonment in Hell will cause. But, note there is no indication whatsoever that this sorrow or regret includes the slightest bit of repentance—even if it did, it would be too late.

And finally, do you know the most horrible thing of all about Hell? It isn’t its fires or worms or darkness or regrets or sorrows. The most terrible thing of all is described by Paul in 2nd Thessalonians when he tells us that the souls in Hell “will be punished with eternal destruction, FOREVER SEPARATED FROM THE LORD AND FROM HIS GLORIOUS POWER.”¹⁴ Can you imagine that?—Hell is the complete separation from God. So what are the implications of that? It is this: ***When God is absent, there is no hope whatsoever.*** That’s why Dante, the Italian poet of the Late Middle Ages, rightly envisioned the sign over Hell’s entrance as reading: “***All hope abandon ye who enter here.***”¹⁵ God is so near to you now—yearning to reach out and help you. Then, that will no longer be the case. There will be no love, no relief, no hope at all.

So as you can see, the Bible is very clear about this: No. 1, Hell exists; it is quite real—and very much eternal. And, No. 2, if you think the horrors of D-Day were bad (and they surely were), they pale a billion times in comparison to Hell. Now, having said this, let me make one thing perfectly clear—I am not telling you this to scare you into turning to Jesus as your Savior. In fact, if any one tries to use the horrors of Hell scare people into coming to Christ, it is actually counter-productive. If your motivation to

serve Jesus is based solely upon hoping to avoid Hell, then, ironically, Hell is the very place that you will likely end up. Our motivation to serve Christ can be based upon only one thing: Our love for Jesus—a love born of true faith in Him as our Lord and Savior. And yet, **Hell is a motivator**, nonetheless. What should our knowledge about Hell motivate us to do?

Well, think about it in these terms: If you were a dedicated doctor and had the medicine that would cure a deadly disease, what should you be motivated to do? You'd be motivated to share that medicine with others. You'd want to save as many people as possible—right? That is the way it should be with Christians. We have the cure to the deadliest of diseases—the disease called **sin—the disease that ultimately causes eternal death in Hell**. The cure is God's Word—that Word, according to the first chapter of John's gospel, is Jesus Christ.¹⁶ It is through the sharing of the Good News of Jesus that your lost family members, friends, co-workers and neighbors can come to truly know Him and be saved from something that, right now, they don't have a clue about. In fact, right after they do some unseemly act, you may hear one of them casually say: "***I know that I am going to Hell for that.***" All that tells you is that they don't know a thing about Hell. If they did, they'd never say something so foolish and naïve. Right now they still have hope. As long as they are still above ground and breathing, hope remains. The lyrics of a song by the Christian singer/songwriter, David Crowder, proclaim: "***My hope is in Jesus. Yesterday's gone. I've been forgiven—washed in the blood!***" If you want to be fireproof—that is your only hope: To be washed in the blood of Jesus Christ.

So, in the final analysis it all comes down to this: **SMOKING** or **NON-SMOKING**—it's all up to you. Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
January 27, 2019
Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor
©2019 All Rights Reserved

¹ 1 Peter 3:15 (ESV) Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.

² Deuteronomy 32:22 (NASB) For a fire is kindled in My anger, And burns to the lowest part of Sheol [Hell], And consumes the earth with its yield, And sets on fire the foundations of the mountains. Proverbs 15:24 (NASB) The path of life leads upward for the wise that he may keep away from Sheol below [Hell]. 2 Peter 2:4 (ESV) For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into Hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment. Matthew 5:22 (NASB) Whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty *enough to go* into the fiery Hell. Matthew 25:41 (NLT2) Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, "Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons." Jude 1:6 (NLT2) And I remind you of the angels who did not stay within the limits of authority God gave them but left the place where they belonged. God has kept them securely chained in prisons of darkness, waiting for the great day of judgment. Revelation 21:8 (NLT2)

But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.

³ Revelation 20:14-15 (NIV) ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵ If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

⁴ <https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/questions/what-is-hell>; see also <https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/9968/do-jehovahs-witnesses-believe-in-annihilation>.

⁵ Matthew 25:46 (NLT2) [Jesus said of lost sinners:] “And they will go away into *eternal punishment*, but the righteous will go into eternal life.” (See also, Matthew 25:41.)

⁶ Jude 1:7 (NLT2) And don't forget Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring towns, which were filled with immorality and every kind of sexual perversion. Those cities were destroyed by fire and serve as a warning of the eternal fire of God's judgment.

⁷ Revelation 20:10 (NLT2) Then the devil, who had deceived them, was thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur, joining the beast and the false prophet. There they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

⁸ Matthew 13:42, 50; 25:41; Mark 9:43; Luke 16:24; Jude 7; Revelation 9:2; 19:20; 20:10, 14-15; 21:8, *Holy Bible, New American Standard*, (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "HELL".

⁹ Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 2 Peter 2:4, 17; Jude 6, 13; Revelation 16:10; 21:8, *Holy Bible, New American Standard*, (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "HELL".

¹⁰ “What Is Nyctophobia and How Is It Treated?,” www.healthline.com/health/nyctophobia.

¹¹ Mark 9:48 (TEV) [Jesus said this about Hell:] “There the worms that eat them never die, and the fire that burns them is never put out.” (See Isaiah 66:24.)

¹² Ian Fair, Stephen Leston, Mark Strauss, ed., *Layman's Bible Commentary – Volume 8: Matthew & Mark*, (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Books, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 181. See also: New Living Translation Study Bible. Lou Barbieri, “Mark,” in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2014), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 1535.

¹³ Matthew 8:12 (NLT2) [Jesus said:] “But many Israelites—those for whom the Kingdom was prepared—will be thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

¹⁴ 2nd Thessalonians 1:9 (NLT2) They will be punished with eternal destruction, forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power.

¹⁵ Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

¹⁶ John 1:1-5, 14 (NLT2) ¹ In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He existed in the beginning with God. ³ God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. ⁴ The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone.

⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. . . ¹⁴ So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.