

## **I'm Not That Kind of Christian: *Hellfire and Brimstone***

A politician dies and ends up at the Pearly Gates talking to St. Peter. The guy looks around and says, "Really? Is this all there is? I mean, it seems nice and all, but don't fluffy white clouds and harps and rainbows get old? Seems a little boring, if you know what I mean. And what about those wings? Do you have to wear them all the time?"

St. Peter says, "Well, we do have alternate accommodations if you'd like to check them out. Just step into this elevator here and you can go down and see what hell's like." So the guy gets in the elevator and it drops way, way down, and opens up in hell. The guy's looking around, and Satan comes over and says, "Hey! Let me give you the tour. We have the finest in eternal accommodations here. You can golf with your buddies, play poker all night if you want—and just look at this buffet! Have you ever seen more food in one place? Why don't you go up and tell Peter that you want to be down here with all of us fun people?"

So....the guy goes back in the elevator and up to the Pearly Gates, where he says, "Hey, Peter! It's really great down there! Some of my best old friends are down there and it looks like a lot of fun. I'll choose hell." "Are you sure?" "Yes, I'm sure." So the guy gets back in the elevator, heads down to hell. When the elevator doors open, he immediately feels the intense heat and sees flames everywhere, and his friends are all in torment. "What's going on? This isn't what you promised me!" "Oh, yeah," says Satan. "You're a politician, right? Well, yesterday we were campaigning, today's the real thing."

Two 6 year olds struggled with the problem of the existence of the devil. One boy said, "Oh, there isn't any devil." The other, rather upset, said, "What do you mean, there isn't any devil? It talks about him all the way through the Bible!" the first replied, "Oh that's not true, you know. It's just like Santa Clause, the devil turns out to be your dad."

How many of you have actually heard a “Hellfire and Brimstone” sermon? One of the biggest shocks of my pastor life came when I attended a funeral for a church member whose son-in-law was a preacher from another denomination. The man who died was definitely one of those “good ol’ boy” types. He liked to drink and play cards and take his wife out dancing. He worked hard for a living, and he attended church almost every Sunday—mostly ‘cause his wife wouldn’t have it any other way. All in all, he was a good guy, well-liked and jovial.

So the son-in-law---who was a member of another denomination---stands up at the pulpit and says, “The path to eternal life is narrow and difficult, and I’m sorry to say that I believe George strayed from that path on a regular basis. Hear this as a lesson and a warning: You do NOT want to end up joining George in the depths of hell, so I’m telling you that right here and right now, You need to confess your sinfulness and accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior! It is the one and only way to escape the fires of hell.

This was at his father-in-law’s funeral!!! I know there have been a lot of hellfire and damnation sermons preached throughout the centuries, but this one was a doozy. Before the preacher was done, the widow and two of her children had walked out!

Then there are those preachers who’ve tried to illustrate their sermons with the actual smell of burning sulfur. Which can be very dramatic---especially when the small amount of burning sulfur (just to set the atmosphere) catches the altar cloth on fire. The church members were getting all worked up, and the preacher was so excited to hear their reaction that he just kept preacher louder and harder.....until he was startled out of his preachin’ rhythm by the wail of the sirens and the arrival of the fire department.

The firefighters were able to quickly get everything under control, but that sermon went down in that church's history and the best "fire and brimstone" sermon ever!

What is it about this style of preaching and evangelizing that makes it so attractive to some and so repulsive to others? The goal is clearly to "save souls from eternal damnation." The problem I have with this approach is that it is based in fear and anxiety. I knew a man in my church in Pueblo who was as close to a saint as anyone I've ever met. He lived to be 94, and was constantly haunted by the thought that he might not truly be saved. A wonderful, selfless, giving man—and he was afraid of missing the cut and being sent to hell.

Surely this is not the way we are supposed to live---afraid that when our time comes, God will not allow us into heaven.

I'm Not That Kind of Christian. I don't believe in hellfire and damnation, and I certainly do not use fanciful, fiery descriptions of eternal torment to SCARE people into loving God. I just don't think it works. I believe that what God truly wants from us is a loving relationship, not a fearful one. Remember that verse: *"Real love casts out fear."* There are a lot of "Christian" people out there who believe that fear is the way to go—that fear is the motivating factor that most efficiently pushes people toward faith.

But what does it say to us about God if we truly believe that God is willing and able to send a good portion of the human beings God has created straight to hell—to eternal torment and suffering? You heard the descriptions in the scripture readings. The Book of Revelation provides us with the most strident images of hell: <sup>20</sup> But the beast was seized, along with the false prophet who had done signs in the beast's presence. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake that burns with sulfur

## Revelation 20: 10

<sup>10</sup> And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Even Jesus seems at times to get into it, saying that “The angels will go out and separate the evil people from the righteous people,<sup>50</sup> and will throw the evil ones into a burning furnace. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.” Whether we like it or not, whether we believe in it or not---hellfire, brimstone and damnation are a powerful part of traditional Christian faith. The question is: What do WE do with it? As modern, thoughtful, progressive Followers of Jesus---how do we deal with these images and scriptures.

One thing that might help: There are a number of different Greek and Hebrew words (the original languages of the Bible) that can be translated as “hell.” The King James Version of the Bible is especially fond of using the word “hell,” even though it is clear that a variety of original words are used in the ancient manuscripts. The word “Sheol” is often translated as “Hell,” even though in its original Hebrew meaning it simply refers to an underground place where people go when they die. It’s not a place of torment—it’s simply non-existence. “Sheol” is also sometimes translated as “the Pit.” The place of the dead.

Another word, “Gehenna,” is also used in the ancient biblical manuscripts, and is also often translated as “Hell.” Gehenna was an actual historical place, though---not an afterlife. Gehenna was the ravine near the city of Jerusalem where everybody dumped their trash and body waste and even the dead bodies of criminals who’d been executed. To reduce the amount of waste, and probably to help hide the stench, fires were kept burning and smoldering in this garbage pit. Can you see how that could conjure up images of a fiery hell as an afterlife?

The one thing that most images of hell agree upon is FIRE. Burning, singeing, stinking, horrendously hot, FIRE. And to make it smell really bad, add some sulfur (brimstone). Ultimately, hell is seen as a place of physical torment by fire, and spiritual torment of being eternally separated from God and God's goodness.

NOW THAT'S WHAT I HAVE TROUBLE WITH: *How can a God who loves us sentence us to eternal torment in a lake of fire? How can a God of Forgiveness allow any of God's children to suffer in that way forever? And if God's main purpose is to have us turn to God in loving relationship.....and if God is all-powerful.....then why can't God just use that power to push each of us into loving relationship?* I know there's free will and all that---but even when we make the wrong choice, it seems like God (being God) could fix that and get us straightened out. Sigh! It's complicated, isn't it? And it doesn't help when we have to wade through centuries of convoluted thinking!

Sharon Baker is a theology professor who has focused her studies on the image of Hell. In her book, *Razing Hell*, she writes:

When I was 26, I found out I was going to hell. Young, impressionable, and without a strong faith, I listened intently as the pastor of a church I was visiting described in graphic detail the tortuous, unquenchable flames that would burn human bodies forever and ever. He spoke of worms eating away at decaying flesh, total darkness without the presence of God, and worst of all, no release from those horrors for all eternity. I certainly didn't want to be one of those unfortunate many to feel the flames licking at my feet soon after leaving life in this world. So I took out the proper fire insurance and asked Jesus to save me from my sins and, therefore, from eternal torment in hell. Whew! That was 25 years ago, and hell is still a hot topic.

Our traditional views of hell as a place of eternal punishment where unbelievers dwell in undying flames contradict the image of God as merciful, forgiving, and compassionate. Our traditional focus on hell as an evangelistic tool does not genuinely communicate the very heart of the gospel. If we receive Jesus as Savior merely because we want to avoid hell, we miss the entire point.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is not “get with me or go to hell.” That’s condemnation and punishment. The Good News of Jesus Christ is that he came to release us from our spiritual captivity and to help us see and understand that God is good, that God is loving and forgiving and open and accepting, that God desires nothing more than to be in loving relationship with each one of us. How all of that Good News got twisted around by a few comments in the gospel stories, I’ll never know. I guess you find whatever you go looking for in there.

I can’t claim to know what happens to us when we die. Nobody can. It’ll be our last and greatest adventure. But I refuse to BELIEVE that God’s grace only works when we are in these bodies on this earth. Does God stop caring about us when our bodies die? I don’t think so. So who’s to say that this process of trying to draw us into loving relationship doesn’t continue for all eternity.....and if God’s effort to draw us close continues for all eternity, then burning in hell can’t be eternal.

Jesus talks about evil people being thrown into a fiery furnace, and Revelation mentions the Lake of Fire. We immediately think of fire as torment and punishment, but there is another Biblical view of fire. The Old Testament prophets used the image of a fire that purifies and brings out the best and most valuable parts. “The Refiner’s Fire.”

In our hymn, “How Firm a Foundation,” one of the verses talks about when we have to walk through fire that we won’t be burned up---that the fire is designed so that “our dross is consumed and our gold is refined.” “Dross” is waste. It’s what needs to be gotten rid of so that the precious metal can be extracted and worked into beautiful, valuable designs.

What if the fires of hell aren’t eternal at all? What if the only truly eternal thing is God’s love and grace? What if—for those who manage to make it through this earthly life without ever turning toward God—What if they are put through a refiner’s fire (not an eternal punishment fire)? Wouldn’t that be a way to draw people into relationship—to burn away the sinful parts and allow our better nature to reach out to God?

One of my favorite authors, Philip Gulley, has written a book called, “If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person.” He writes about his belief in Universal Salvation---that everybody makes the cut and eventually gets to enter into eternal life with God. He suggests that hell might be a place of “remedial learning” for people who didn’t learn how to live in love and grace in this life. But he also puts forth the idea that whatever punishment might possibly exist is not eternal. That God eventually has God’s way and welcomes each and every one of us into heaven.....whatever heaven may be!

You know, there are all kinds of word studies and different ways of interpreting scripture passages that can throw light on new ways of thinking about hellfire and damnation. Suffice it to say that I am glad, relieved and grateful to be a Western United Methodist. We’re allowed—even encouraged—to consider the possibility that centuries-worth of Christians didn’t necessarily get it right.

There is a long tradition of Universal Salvation in our Christian heritage. It's a sidelight, and mostly considered heresy. Maybe our need for there to be a hell of eternal punishment for people who do evil things is just OUR need for JUSTICE, in the only way we can envision spiritual justice. Maybe, just maybe, once again God chooses not to see the situation the way we do.

There are a lot of pastors out there pounding pulpits and trying to get their parishioners to run scared out of their wits into the kingdom of God. "Who cares?" we might say. "As long as they come to God, then who cares if they do it out of fear?"

God might care. God may desire to draw us in to spend eternity in loving communion---not by scaring us to death, but by luring us with divine compassion, urging us gently with a caring hand, winning us over, forgiving, reconciling, and calling us to do the same.

I am not the kind of Christian who believes that our loving and compassionate God will sentence any of God's precious children to the fires of eternal punishment. The refining fire of remedial spiritual learning, perhaps---but not an eternal hell. I don't know how it works---and I figure that it's God's part to figure it all out. All I need to do is believe with all my heart that the God who created us, the Spirit that sustains us, has claimed our lives and will never let us go---even if we have to walk through the fires of hell.

I'm not a hellfire and brimstone kind of Christian. I am an eternally loved child of God kind of Christian. How about you? Amen.