

## NAVIGATING HARD QUESTIONS (LIKE HELL)

Ken Wilson, 9.9.18

Last week: What do we make of parts of the Bible that reflect patriarchy (rule of men over women)? Today: What's up with Hell?

I'm **unrecovered Jesus freak**...sold on way of Jesus. Psychologist might say Jesus is my "imaginary friend"—but I can't help thinking he's real. And my therapist, a Jewish man, doesn't think I'm crazy.

Part of my love for Jesus is my love for Scripture—the book that shaped him and that he shaped.

But series is "**navigating hard questions**"—when Great Lakes freeze over they send the ice-breaker to make a way through.

We're reading Bible then boom! Hit icy patch. If we were exploring ancient texts of any religious tradition, we'd hit icy patches. But this is our book. None of hard questions is easy. Not offering "the answer" but sharing how we navigate them ourselves

Many different versions of "doctrine of hell"—different churches have different official statements (we don't) and people in the churches disagree about what official statements actually mean, like justices of the Supreme Court do about constitution.

In general, RC & Protestant traditions have taught: some are saved, some are damned, and the damned go to hell (or in a spiritual condition of hell) that involves "**eternal conscious torment.**" View of former denomination though I was a CO.

**Research:** people who hold this view often soften it in application. Aunt Mary held it but when someone died who wasn't her kind of Christian, she'd always get them saved through a loophole (I said, "God bless you" and he squeezed my hand.") Her **soft heart** was closer to **mind of God** than her **hard head**, as is often case.

This version of hell goes well beyond what Jesus taught—that's my take, and here's my evidence:

Nearly every use of "hell" (English translations) occurs in 3 of 4 gospels. Absent in gospel of John and in writings of Paul. One occurrence in letter of James (in tone similar to Jesus). So real question is: *What did Jesus mean by the hell sayings?*

In gospels, hell sayings occur on five occasions; but with repetition in 3 gospels, adds up to a lot of hell talk. Not a problem we solve with “Oh well that’s cranky Paul—nice Jesus doesn’t talk like that.”

If we study the context of these five occasions something emerges:

**Jesus never threatens “ordinary people” (non-experts in law, non-leaders) with hell.**

Hell saying comes in context of a dispute with a subset of religious leaders. Jesus is warning those leaders directly, or warning his disciples not to follow their lead. We might say they are aimed at “religious oppressors”—people who claim divine authority to put unbearable burdens on other people.

To broaden our perspective even further, the hell sayings of Jesus are part of a prophetic tradition in Israel aimed at Israel’s oppressors. Israel is a minority under the thumb of powerful oppressor and has been for most of its history. The treats of hell are aimed at their oppressors as a form of **theological rage** when someone has a boot on your head and your face is in the mud.

Reason I wouldn’t vote to remove hell sayings from Bible: **I believe the oppressed are allowed their theological rage. And oppressors need to hear their rage rather than be shielded from it.**

But even more fundamental issue—problem of **translation**. NT written in Greek not English. “Hell” is a word in English that is used to translate GK, “Hades” and “Gehenna” Gk. form of Hebrew word

*In NT there is no single Greek word corresponding to English word “hell” despite its frequent use in English translations. And there is no Greek term that corresponds to the picture of hell—a kingdom of ingenious tortures ruled by Satan—that took shape many centuries after the NT was written (paraphrase David Bentley Hart)*

Gk. *Hades*, similar to Heb, *Sheol* (language of OT) = “realm of dead.” Jewish people didn’t have a defined view of after-life. Presumed dead were “somewhere”—but Hades/Sheol dream like place (dreams of loved ones after sudden death). No separation between “righteous/wicked”—realm of dead. That’s one Greek word often translated “Hell” in the gospels.

Other word, **Gehenna** refers to a real place at a time on outskirts of Old Jerusalem, garbage dump. By legend, once used for child sacrifice. Like all garbage dumps, always something smoldering—that’s where “fires that don’t go out” language comes from.

When Jesus refers to Gehenna, employing it prophetic metaphor —vivid word picture. Engaging in prophetic rhetoric. Typical: ***“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell<sup>[a]</sup> as yourselves.”*** (Mt. 23:14)

It’s **long way** from “realm of the dead” or “gehenna” (referring to a garbage dump) to Hell as a place or state of unending conscious torment and it’s **a trip you don’t have to take.**

Where did idea of hell as “a place of where the damned experience eternal conscious torment” come from? Comes from popular writings of an **Italian poet** whose first name was **Dante**

He wrote a trilogy called The Divine Comedy. The first book in the trilogy is “The Inferno”—a man named Dante is guided by the poet Virgil through a tour of the seven descending circles of hell.

Dante was influenced by the towering theologian who preceded him named Thomas Aquinas (Catholic schools named Aquinas) whose writing amount to 10 million words. Much rich theology in Aquinas, but he also taught that same-gender sex was “worse than incest,” so we wouldn’t let him speak here without a conversation.

Aquinas & Dante are writing well over a thousand years after NT written. Jesus religion by then has been unmoored from its Jewish origins. Today we know a lot more about the surrounding culture of Older Testament and the Newer Testament than was known then. So many more documents discovered.

Dante is offering a literary version of what today would be a video game to embellish a particular version of Hell—hard to know whether it would have been recognized by rabbi Jesus or Paul.

We cannot ascribe to Jesus all the baggage that has been added to English word hell—vastly embellished by an Italian poet of 14<sup>th</sup> C.

This version of hell was a way to assert the certainty of **accountability**: answering to God for our lives.

I believe we are all accountable to God. That we will all answer to God for our lives. What that accounting will look like is largely speculative. **I picture it as a time of tears, not terror.**

A while back I met with a man I had served as pastor many years ago. We baptized him, were his first church when he's in his 40s.

After his initial connection moved far away, got involved in a church much like one I pastored 20 years ago.

Turns out he was a closeted gay man. He didn't share that with me many years ago. I understand why—not a safe place for gay people

Then he tells a story I've heard too many times—of finding this great church in another city, falling in love with people, experiencing God. Presents as an out gay man there and he's told he's perfectly welcome. Gets deeply involved, great experience.

Until it wasn't. Push came to shove—the hidden policies manifest.

Used against him. Brutal. Psychological torture. Loss of friends, loss of community, faith shaken to core.

Now he's back exploring possibility of reconnecting with church.

As he is telling me his story, I realize: if I had been the pastor I am now, rather than the one I was then, when he first came to faith, he might have been this brutal/years long suffering.

In that moment, I felt something like **purifying remorse**. When he met me in his 40s, I hadn't done my homework on LGBTQ—I was just abiding by party line. I was I his first pastor—that's a place of privilege and responsibility. My inattention then to what Bible is and isn't saying about today's LGBTQ people affected him. He might have been spared a great deal of suffering. This not something he brought up. The Spirit did in me. I said, "I'm so sorry I didn't get there sooner for you." Why? I felt I was **accountable** to God and to this child of God. I needed to say that.

He said, "I know. Thanks for saying that." In that moment, there was for me a **little mend** in the torn fabric of love. That is what it feels like to answer to God—to answer to the God who is Love.

**Answering to God is a matter of tears, not terror.**

**Shift toward our time of reflection...**

Propose a healing text for those who have personally affected by the doctrine of hell as a place of never-ending conscious torment

It's in a letter called First John. Letter is concerned with discerning the real Jesus in a context confused by many competing versions.

**In love there is no fear; rather the love that is perfect casts out fear, because fear carries chastisement [punishment], and whoever fears has not been perfected [completed] in love.**

(1 John 4:18)

How would perfect love cast fear out of you? In a perfectly loving way perfectly suited to you. Such that afterwards you would say, "Wow. That was amazing. Thank you."

Fear is so deeply part of our brain-body-psyche (a key to our survival) that it must be a lifelong process and possibly one that extends beyond the grave. Since perfect love is perfectly patient and non-coercive.

Suggest that we take some time to let a picture represents this kind of love (one that drives out fear, but does so in a perfectly loving way, perfectly suited to you.

+ could picture love as a wise old woman sitting in a room and you can get an appointment with her and just sit in the room with her and tell her your fears or just feel your fears and sitting there they just lessen...or she reaches over you and touches your hand

+ could picture love like a patch of fog—light at first, thicker as you enter it...as you enter the fog, first surface fears are left behind...then deeper more significant ones, and you only proceed as ready

+ could be music playing that you feel drawn to—feint at first then as you get closer it gets louder...and effect of music charm fears

***"In love there is no fear; rather the love that is perfect removes fear"***