

Welcome

Good morning! I'm Pastor Sonya. I'm one of the pastors on the preaching team here at Catalyst and I'll be preaching today.

I grew up in the 80s when there was a huge backlash with heavy metal. I heard sermons that listening to heavy metal was going to lead you to hell. I wondered, what's up with hell?

Ironically, according to my own personal survey, Navajo people like heavy metal. Fun fact from my personal survey, the tribe next to Navajo land in Arizona, the Hopis like reggae. So being Navajo, I grew up listening to heavy metal and attending heavy metal concerts. Given everything I had been told, I was surprised that I didn't see any rituals or altars to Satan. No one tried to convert me to a religion and asked if I thought about where I would go when I die (except the church). Nothing at OzzFest, nothing at Metallica, nothing at Black Sabbath Reunion Tour, nothing at Anthrax, nothing at the many other concerts I attended. I couldn't deny that how metal bands spoke of hell didn't go against what I was taught of hell in the church.

I didn't understand why Christians were so upset about heavy metal music, especially since the band didn't deny the Christian concept of hell and how crappy hell will be. The metal band, Candlemass' lament the horror and evils of hell that await beyond hell's gates in their song, "Demon's Gate." Heavy metal also combined religious and horror themes often to explain suffering that occurs in everyday life and the struggles of choosing right over wrong, good over evil. The song, "Heaven and Hell" by Black Sabbath is inspired by how people have to decide between good and evil and how these choices are something we have to think about and choose ourselves. Heavy metal brings to the forefront these nightmarish images of hell, there's no denying that the visuals create a connection of disorder, conflict, mayhem, and opposition. If the Christian concept of this hell and that it is a choice every person has to make isn't rebutted by the darkest of heavy metal musicians, why were Christians bothered by the songs that mirrored what they preached Sunday morning?

Hell has become common in our daily use of language. The weather feels like hell. It's hell sitting in traffic. You're going to catch hell if you don't finish your chores. Hell in Christian circles is often frightful and connected to eternal punishment, "you're going to burn in hell for your sins." But the Bible does not have as much of an interest in hell. The Bible has more of an interest in the hope in this life and for us to stop being hell-bent thinking this world is not worth redeeming.

I used to be so fearful of death because I heard way too often that I would go to hell for my sins and the only way to save myself was to repent of my sins to guarantee my get out of hell card. I

am thankful today that there's more to only saving myself from hell - there is good news that doesn't end at a life of fire. The good news is God has given the gift of life that is enacted here on earth and in heaven. Let's sing and celebrate our risen Savior, Christ Jesus who brought the hope of resurrection to all.

Message

This summer, we're putting your questions front and center. All spring, we collected your questions and we got dozens. We've grouped them all together and are working through them together this summer.

A couple of principles are guiding our series:

Here at Catalyst, doubts and questions aren't enemies of faith; quite the opposite. We think it matters that Jesus asked way more questions than he gave answers.

Secondly, we're not trying to settle questions here. The goal of this series is to create conversation, not consensus. These messages are the beginning of conversations. Not the end. Our goal is to ask better questions together.

Today's questions...

What about hell? What's Catalyst's position on hell? What if someone says the sinner's prayer right before they die? Does that mean they magically go to heaven?

I have a hard time believing in Hell. I feel like earth or just not having peace is "hell". Is hell as literal as pastors preach? A fiery place of demons for eternity? That seems excessive and no grace. I have many atheist friends who I know God would not want to send to Hell.

What's up with hell?!

Heavy metal at its best brings to light hell and how hell could certainly be here. There are songs that speak about injustice, disaster, and contradictions of mainstream society. There's also other non-metal songs that tell us of hell, "Hell Is for Children" sung by Pat Benatar on her 1980 album. This song was written to bring to light child abuses that were written about in the New York Times. There's the song, "Hell" by James Brown which discusses what hell can happen and feel like in day-to-day life... "It's hell paying taxes, when there's no money left."

I do remember some of the heavy metal songs I listened to talk about hell. Honestly, the songs that I listened to painted pictures of hell on earth. One of my favorite songs is "War Pigs" by

Black Sabbath which speaks of the horrors and injustice of war created by politicians and military leaders. The politicians and military leaders' sins are revealed in the mistreatment of people and how their day of judgment will come by the hand of God. The end of the song gives a glimpse of hell the advocates of injustice and oppression chose.

There's no denying hell. But what is it, exactly? Is hell the classic religious image of the devil, the devil's legions, a lake of fire and brimstone? Are there identifiable characteristics of hell? If so, what are they? And, maybe the most important question today, What's up with the Church's obsession with hell?

One of the few places where the church and the heaviest of metal bands agree is on hell's tyranny, death, misery, and destruction. So if we all agree that hell is so bad, why would a person ever choose hell over heaven?

Christians use the idea of hell to scare people into conversion. The hell we often preach is a hell where God sends those he's judged - sinners, non-Christians, the devil and his legions - who will suffer endless punishment for all of eternity for not repenting of sins and accepting Jesus into their hearts. This hell is dark, hot, stinky, it's a place full of horrors. Hell is an awful place, and if you don't want to go there, you better accept Jesus right now!

Weirdly it's the people that haven't accepted Jesus who go to hell and not the wicked who prey and prayed the sinner's prayer just before they die. How does God's justice work in allowing a person who has killed all their life into heaven and not allow a person who has advocated and brought clean water to a community with contaminated water because they have not prayed the sinner's prayer? Why would a person who cares for their neighbor, advocates for the marginalized and works towards restoration be sent to hell? Why would a God who is just and loving create a magical prayer to escape hell? Does that understanding of 'salvation' align with the Jesus who came to redeem, restore, and reconcile?

How much do I know about hell when early Hebrew writers did not make this a major topic?

The Hebrew writers did not have much interest about the afterlife and the Old Testament does not have much about the afterlife. For the Hebrew people, hell was called Sheol, the land of the dead which consisted of both good and bad people. Here's Jacob, the father of the 12 tribes of Israel, when he thinks one of his children has died:

“His family all tried to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. “I will go *down to Sheol* mourning for my son,” he would say, and then he would weep.” -- Genesis 37:35

Jacob didn't look forward to a happy reunion with his son in Sheol. He just knew that, in the end, the dead all go to the same place.

The idea of hell has developed over many centuries from Greek texts, the Jewish tradition, and most likely Mesopotamian and Egyptian concepts. The New Testament uses a couple of different words. One of them is Hades, the Greek word for afterlife. While Hades occasionally features creative punishments - like Prometheus having his liver eaten or Sisyphus pushing that boulder up a hill - the vast majority of those sent to Hades simply forget. It's a lot like the Hebrews' Sheol.

The other word the New Testament uses a lot is Gehenna. Gehenna is a valley outside the city of Jerusalem. As a physical location, it has a long, strange history. It was a site of child sacrifice to the god Moloch, and by Jesus' day, had become synonymous with the idea of punishment and destruction. You can feel that in the New Testament passages that shape our idea of hell. Mark has Jesus saying this bit about Gehenna (which our Bibles translate as 'hell'), **“And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. It's better to enter the Kingdom of God with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell (gehenna), ‘where the maggots never die and the fire never goes out.’”** -- Mark 9:47-48 (NLT)

There's the fire imagery we associate so closely with hell. The book of Revelation makes that even more explicit: **“Then a third angel followed them, shouting, “Anyone who worships the beast and his statue or who accepts his mark on the forehead or on the hand must drink the wine of God's anger. It has been poured full strength into God's cup of wrath. And they will be tormented with fire and burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. The smoke of their torment will rise forever and ever, and they will have no relief day or night, for they have worshiped the beast and his statue and have accepted the mark of his name.”** -- Revelation 14:9-11

The images created of hell are: it is a fiery furnace where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Hell is where maggots never die and the fires of hell never burn out. Hell has no relief from torment. Christian legend has hell built up on a few passages. Hell is associated with the end of life, with the devil, satan's legions, and all the people who didn't repent from their sin.

In Matthew, Jesus says, **“That is the way it will be at the end of the world. The angels will come and separate the wicked people from the righteous, throwing the wicked into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”** -- Matthew 13:49-50 (NLT)

There are things that we want to be judged on. We want God's judgment to condemn those who inflict evil, harm and death. We don't want condemnation to come to those who lived their life to do good and caring for their neighbors who are the immigrants, the poor, the marginalized, the

imprisoned and the sick. We don't want injustice to carry on into the afterlife. What does the church do in preventing and speaking up against hell people experience from wars, illness, unjust and inhumane treatment, oppression, and suffering that leads to death? Have us Jesus followers considered why a person would choose heaven when nothing is done now against brutality against the weak, marginalized, and oppressed? How is heaven any better if my oppressors and abusers are not held accountable for the hell they've put me, my community, and my people through?

God calls us to explore the meaning of divine judgment and what that means to a community of Christ followers who still are part of the earthly world.

Let's pause here and hope that the God we meet in Scripture loves the world enough to be just. Let's sing about the God who has taught us that loving our neighbor as ourselves is how justice will be measured.

Song

Hell as eternal punishment cannot be what Jesus followers work towards. If you do not have a concrete understanding of injustice, oppression, and inequality in the world as to why people cry out and at times wish for death - then you do not have the right to judge or say how, why, and who goes to hell. "And the dead were judged according to what they had done, as recorded in the books." This should offer up discussion if we appropriately offer God's salvation to all and do we appropriately live out God acting rationally to people. Or do we think that if a person prays a sinner's prayer that they are giving a get out of hell free card without the act of reconciling and restoring themselves to those they have harmed or mistreated?

How can Hell help us understand salvation differently in the here and now? Let's look at two stories from Luke's gospel - one where Jesus tells a parable about a rich man, and one where Jesus encounters a rich man.

Turn with us to Luke 16.

Jesus said, "There was a certain rich man who was splendidly clothed in purple and fine linen and who lived each day in luxury. At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. As Lazarus lay there longing for scraps from the rich man's table, the dogs would come and lick his open sores.

"Finally, the poor man died and was carried by the angels to sit beside Abraham at the heavenly banquet. The rich man also died and was buried, and he went to the place of the dead. There, in torment, he saw Abraham in the far distance with Lazarus at his side.

“The rich man shouted, ‘Father Abraham, have some pity! Send Lazarus over here to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue. I am in anguish in these flames.’

“But Abraham said to him, ‘Son, remember that during your lifetime you had everything you wanted, and Lazarus had nothing. So now he is here being comforted, and you are in anguish. And besides, there is a great chasm separating us. No one can cross over to you from here, and no one can cross over to us from there.’ -- Luke 16:19-26

Jesus tells this story about this rich man who feasts everyday and Lazarus who longs for mere scraps from the rich man’s table. The rich man and Lazarus both die and enter Hades. Even in death, the rich man still does not see Lazarus as equal or his neighbor and asked Abraham to have pity on him by sending Lazarus to lessen his torment. The rich man shows no remorse for the way he treated Lazarus before death. The rich man who is in a privileged position refused to care for his neighbor he clearly saw was hungry, sick, and suffering. Jesus teaches us that hell is there for those who refuse to love their neighbor as themselves.

Now let’s look at Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus in Luke 19.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, which meant he was incredibly wealthy. He had gained that wealth by cheating and exploiting his community. When Zacchaeus hears Jesus is coming through town, he wants to see Jesus. So he climbs a tree for a better view. Jesus spots Zacchaeus, instructs him to climb down and he is going to his home. Zacchaeus was happy (and probably surprised a famous rabbi wanted to be associated with him). Luke explains “everyone” is not happy that Jesus is going to Zacchaeus’ house. “Everyone” called Zacchaeus a sinner. But in response to Jesus’ kindness toward him, “Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, ‘I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!’” (Luke 19:8, NLT)

The complete and sudden change of Zacchaeus reveals his repentance of his abusive use of power and exploits towards the community he wronged. Jesus then approves the steps Zacchaeus takes of settling his injustice he has done of giving half of his wealth to the poor and repaying back four times as much of the people he wronged. Jesus' response to Zacchaeus, “Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.” (Luke 19:9-10, NLT)

In Luke, salvation is not a magic prayer you chant to erase bad things you’ve done. Salvation comes to Zacchaeus because he takes steps to restore his relationship with God *by restoring his relationship with his neighbors*. Jesus tells the crowd that Zacchaeus is no longer a “sinner” and what he has done is a true act of repentance.

God’s hell policy does not have a loophole. Jesus communicates to the people that Zacchaeus has changed the environment of injustice and restores Zacchaeus back into the community.

Zacchaeus is brought back to the salvation promised by God. Unlike the rich man of the earlier parable, Zacchaeus won't find himself in hell. Zacchaeus corrects what he has broken. Zacchaeus knows that he unjustly acquired his wealth and is willing to correct the wrong. Jesus acknowledges this and Jesus' response to Zacchaeus reveals how God responds to a person taking accountability of their immoral actions. Love and justice for neighbors are connected to repenting of sin.

“Sing me a song, you're a singer. Do me a wrong, you're a bringer of evil. The Devil is never a maker. The less that you give, you're a taker... The lover of life's not a sinner... Love can be seen as the answer... So it's on and on and on, Heaven and Hell.” (Heaven and Hell by Black Sabbath)

The problem with hell is how one responds to hell. It's interesting that heavy metal musicians have the same understanding as Christian theologians that hell is the absence of God. Images of hell are common. We see it in movies, like Constantine which has vivid imagery of hell. Many heavy metal bands use hell imagery in their album covers. The reaction towards these images of hell vary from fear of entering hell to acceptance of hell. One person could believe that you could escape hell just as long as you repent of sin at any time. This idea of hell does not discuss God's judgment since you are automatically forgiven - you do not have to consider restorative action towards anyone you have sinned against - you would believe that you didn't have to modify your life because God forgave you of your sins. What policy do you have in place for a person to go to hell? How does that policy compare to the character of God who wants to redeem, restore and reconcile all of humanity and creation back to him? How we understand hell is how we perceive God's character, his action of judgment, and sometimes what we think the way God should act towards others. After the obsession with fires of hell are quenched by God's never-ending grace - God's love for all comes to us through Christ standing at the gates of hell and proclaiming to heal, restore, and reconcile us to God's kingdom of life.

Examen + Communion

Jesus, who has established the church so hell would not prevail, our giver of life and light invites us to the table. The only requirement is that we be willing to see who Jesus is. We have to acknowledge that we are God's beloved children, that our sin separates us from God. We have to acknowledge that we live in a world of false truths. And we have to acknowledge that Jesus is the Truth, the one who came to save us.

Before we receive Communion together, we're going to reflect in prayer. I'll ask you some questions, and give you an opportunity to ask them to God. Then we'll pray together.

1. When in the last week have I chosen to forgive or worked to make amends?
2. When in the last week have I been responsible for making the world a little more hellish?

3. How in the next week will I have the opportunity to influence the world for good or ill?
4. How can I join God in working for justice and flourishing this week?

God, we come to you and ask to let us see your purpose clearly. As we receive these elements, may they become a spiritual food for us. Where we cannot see, grant us healing in order to envision your good purpose. May we see the world you created more clearly and to live in it more faithfully. In your name we pray. Amen.

On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this in remembrance of me as often as you drink it.” For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord’s death until he comes again.

Assignment + Blessing

Thank you to all who give financial support. It is because of your faithful generosity that allows for ministry to continue through the local and virtual community.

Thank you volunteers that help with the local and hybrid congregation. It is a vital component that helps in creating space for us to gather and fellowship.

Your assignment this week is to think about biblical passages that may have been used to condemn you to hell and scare you into Christianity. Think how this type of scare tactic has distorted God’s unwavering love.

Go in the grace and peace of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. See you next week!

FINAL WEEK:

- How Abram was saved (faith, credited to him as ‘righteousness’)
- If faith is RELATIONSHIP, not legal status, then question is, “How are we responding to the God who has been made known to us?”
- In Rom 1, Paul argues that God is present enough in creation that all can know God. This is what Navajo faith looks like.
- So too, some have been shown a picture of Jesus that is false. Who’s held accountable for that? This is where parable of the sheep and goats comes in: