

The Weight of Glory—Talks about Heaven
How can a God of love send people to hell?
Revelation 20:1-15
February 12th
Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers

Simon Wiesenthal, an Austrian Jew who survived the Holocaust, spent the rest of his life tracking down those who tried to escape justice, *“I want everyone to know the Nazis weren’t able to kill millions of people and get away with it,”* he explained.

All of us experience righteous anger at the wickedness of atrocities such as the Holocaust. And all of us feel that men and women who were responsible for the brutal murder of six million Jews should be brought to trial and be punished.

At a smaller scale, perhaps, we all feel indignation against those who have harmed us, whether mentally, physically or reputationally. Even children have a keen sense of justice: What child does not cry “unfair” when blamed for what a bother or sister did?!

Why do we feel injustice so deeply? It is because you and I have been made in the image of a just God, *“Righteous are You, O Lord, And upright are Your judgments.” (Psalm 119:137)* *“All His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.” (Deuteronomy 32:4)*

For a moment, let’s put exceptionally wicked men like Hitler and Stalin to one side. The Bible says that you and I have also got a problem with God’s justice! For the Bible teaches that *you and I* have done evil in God’s eyes. We’ve walked out on him and we have done many things, in thought, word and deed that are wrong, as Romans 3:9-18 teaches. *“The Lord God saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.” (Gen 7:5)*. From the moment we become aware of right from wrong, we sin in thought, in word and deed. We do not love God, as we should nor our fellow man as we ought. *“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23)*. Not just notorious sinners, but all of us! And since God is the fair Judge of the Universe we all deserve God’s righteous Judgement, I do, and so do you. *“The wages of sin is death...” (Rom. 6:23)*

No-one in the Bible spoke more about hell than gentle Jesus, meek and mild, *“Do not*

be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28) “...They will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” (Matthew 25:46) “It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” (Mark 9:47-48)

His apostles were equally clear: *“They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). “In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.” (Jude 1:7). “Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.” (Revelation 20:14)*

But the Scriptures also teach, that though God is Righteous, he is *also* filled with love and mercy, *“God our Saviour wants everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:4). “God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)*

So that though the wages of sin is death, *“the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 6:23)* God sent his Son into the world to rescue us from the sentence our sins deserve by taking that punishment on himself and paying its full debt on the cross! And he offers freely the gift of eternal life to everyone who will receive it! This morning we must hear three truths together;

- The Day of Judgement
- The Punishment of the Wicked
- The Good news of Jesus Christ

But first, let me be honest and say that I have battled with this solemn subject all week long, and I’ve had to ask myself why it’s so difficult to preach about, and I’ve had to ask why do we rarely hear sermons about hell? And I came to the conclusion that there are wrong reasons why churches and preachers do not talk about hell, but one understandable reason. The unacceptable reasons include the following:

1. Some churches fear putting people off! Some churches are so addicted to numbers that they shrink from any subject that might diminish their popularity or, so they steer a

wide berth from the rocky outcrops of sexuality, gender—and hell.

2. *Some don't preach it because they can't understand it.* Some don't preach about hell because they reject what the puny human mind cannot grasp.

For example they might say “How can *eternal suffering* ever be just recompense for *momentary sin*?” A person sins for a moment, but they are punished forever? Can't understand that. Or they say that Hell is an outdated medieval idea. Or they say, that a God of love couldn't possibly send people to hell. Love and punishment, like oil and water, can't mix.

3. *Some churches don't preach it simply because they have drifted away from the Bible.* This very week, the CoE has taken two more steps away from the Bible. It's an embarrassing and tragic spectacle. The Synod decided to bless same-sex couples (which according to Scripture is blessing sin), and they debated whether they should stop using masculine pronouns and names to describe God. Presumably, Jesus, the founder of their religion, got it wrong when he encouraged his followers to say, “*Our Father* who art in heaven?” We should weep.

4. *We live in a comfortable west.* A fourth reason churches no longer preach about God's righteous judgement, at least in the West, is because we live in such a soft culture. By and large we are isolated from the horrors of war, famine and disaster, except at a distance through our news channels. Cushioned by comfort we recoil from any talk about suffering, punishment, anguish, misery.

None of these are good enough reasons to avoid the subject of divine judgement, brothers and sisters. The only understandable reason we may shy away from the subject of hell, and it is that hell is such a harrowing place, for *If heaven is more wonderful than our sweetest dreams, hell is more terrifying than our worst nightmares. If heaven is more wonderful than we could ever imagine, hell is more terrifying than we could ever make up.*

The evangelist DL Moody said that no-one should preach about hell without a tear in his eyes. When Jesus warned Jerusalem about the doom to come—in AD 70 the Roman Governor Titus attacked the city and both the destruction and the siege leading up to the fall of the city were truly horrific – Jesus lamented, “*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem (do you feel the pathos?) the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers!*

How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me." (Matthew 22:37)

And when the apostle Paul thought about the Jews rejecting their Messiah, Jesus Christ he wrote: *"I have deep sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my own flesh and blood, the people of Israel."* (Romans 9:2-3)

It's understandable to shrink away from the subject because of its horrors. And yet, if we are to be faithful to the Scriptures - and faithful to the Good News - we must preach about hell, but, always with sorrow in our hearts and a tear in our eyes.

#1 The Day of Judgement

One day, when Jesus Christ returns in power and glory, everyone will stand before his throne: *"I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it... and I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened."* (Rev 20:12) Jesus Christ will judge the world, a man who understands what is like to live in this fallen world. I am so glad Jesus will be my Judge! Believers will be judged as well as unbelievers: *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad"* (2 Corinthians 5:10)

The outcome of a believer's judgement will not be punishment for *"there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* (Romans 8:1). Our sins have been paid for in full by the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Praise God! No believer needs to fear standing before Jesus our Judge! Instead, believers will face a judgment of reward, for the way we used our gifts and served the Lord faithfully: *"For no-one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward,. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."* (1 Corinthians 3:11-15)

If we build our relationships, our marriages, our family life, our work life, our Christian ministry on our own ideas rather than Christ's Word, they will all be destroyed like

straw and hay, we will be saved, but we will have no reward in heaven for our labours here below. But if we build our lives on the rock, then our labours, by his grace, will stand the test of Judgement day.

For unbelievers, Judgement day will be a fearful day. All their evil thoughts, all their evil words, all their evil deeds, every one written in the books, will be revealed, *“God will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and expose the motives of men’s hearts.”* (1 Corinthians 4:5). Every act will be judged, including every foolish word, *“But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.”* (Matthew 12:36) And the outcome of that judgement for unbelievers, will be eternal punishment, *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.... Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”* (Matthew 25: 31-41)

#2 The Punishment of the Wicked

“Hell, according to the Scriptures, is a place of eternal conscious punishment for the wicked.”

Hell was prepared for Satan and his angels, (Matthew 25). Hell is everlasting, *“they will punished with everlasting destruction.”* (2 Thessalonians 1:9). Hell is embodied, *“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.”* (John 5) Hell is conscious suffering, *“I am in agony in this fire..”* (Luke 16:24) Hell is where the gracious presence of God is absent, *“they will be... shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.”* (2 Thessalonians 1:9). Hell is where people continue to think wrong and act wickedly, the Rich Man still thinks that he is above Lazarus and treats him as a skivvy (Luke 16) *“Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong, let him who is vile continue to be vile”* (Revelation 22:11)

#3 The Good News

The Scriptures tell us about hell, not to satisfy a morbid curiosity, but for three good news reasons:

(1) We can leave justice to God. Has someone done you wrong? Don't take revenge! "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: It is mine to avenge, I will repay." (Romans 12:19)

(2) As a warning not to turn back. The book of Hebrews was written to true believers who—because they were finding the Christian life hard—were thinking of walking out on Christ, the writer warns them that if they walk out, only judgement awaits:

"If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgement and raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant, that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace." (Hebrews 10:26-29) "How shall we escape if we escape such a great salvation?" (2:3)

(3) God has made a way for us to escape judgement!

The best news of all, God has done everything necessary for us to escape the righteous judgement of hell. He sent his Son into the world to pay for our wrong doing. This payment took place when Jesus was crucified, in some remarkable way, God was punishing Jesus Christ for our sins, the Just for the Unjust, so that we can be forgiven for all the wrong we have done.

All we are called to do is to repent of our sins, renounce them, turn away from them, and believe the Good News of Jesus Christ! Have you done that yet? The Bible says "Today is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2)

And if we have loved ones who do not yet believe, let us continue to pray earnestly and hopefully for them. We can say to the Lord, "You have said in your word it's not your will that anyone should perish, so please bring salvation to my son, my daughter, my husband, my wife. You say that if I pray in keeping with your will you will hear me. I am praying in line with your will. Please visit them with your salvation!" Keep praying!