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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

The Hell of Hell

By David Woodyard

One does not have to be on the perimeter of Christianity to be disturbed by references to hell. Both skeptic and solid citizens of faith maintain a rather quaint picture of what it is like: It focuses on a cosmic bonfire beneath the earth attended by red devils with pitchforks roasting the damned. While Dante, Milton and Michelangelo have done much to foster this vision, the New Testament is not without blame. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is represented as saying that whoever calls another a fool “*shall be liable to the hell of fire*” (Matthew 5:22). And the author of Revelation cannot resist a reference to the destiny of the wicked: They will be “*tormented with fire and brimstone*” (Revelation 14:10).

Yet for all the implications that hell is a specific region on a cosmic map, it can be interpreted as a symbol for a state of existence. This is apparent if we examine several contexts in which the word is used. When David is in anguish because of his betrayal at the hands of Saul, he expresses it by saying, “*The cords of hell entangled me*” (2 Samuel 22:6). When the Psalmist is in a state of personal stress, he refers to what he is experiencing as “*the snares of hell*” (Psalm 116:3). When Jonah is agonizing with his fate, it is said he cried out to God from the “*belly of hell*” (Jonah 2:2).

While the vividness of the biblical tradition implies that hell is a place, it needs to be understood as meaning an ever-present possibility in life. Inevitably it gets spatialized and temporalized, otherwise we cannot take hold of it; but the reference is to a reality in our lives now and always. To understand the depth of meaning in this symbol, it may be helpful to probe the situation of the man of whom it was said, he went to hell.

One sentence describes him: “*There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day*” (Luke 16:19). Immediately the image comes alive of one whose self-indulgence knew no bounds. The faintest desire was sufficient justification to possess any object. In his wardrobe at one time were more garments than most men wear in a lifetime. The waste from his table would be perceived as a feast in a normal household. In him the



wish to have everything was never frustrated.

But if this is all we see in him we miss the tragedy of his situation. The self-indulgence was but a symptom of a deeper problem: He passionately loved the one thing that could not love him back; he loved himself. There was one dominant affection in his life, and he was its object. The universe came to a focus in him, and in everything he sought his own. It was the perspective, from which all was viewed, and the norm by which all was measured, and the focal point around which all was organized.

Now it is but a child’s skip from this to a brand of existentialism with which many are intrigued. Its essential message is this:

All I have in this world is myself. There are no values for me to appropriate, there is no meaning that I can embrace, there is no destiny for me to fulfill. In an indifferent and hostile world I have to become a self against the backdrop of nothingness. My only resource is self-awareness. Even the self which is aware has no shape or content until I give it form. A glob is thrust into the universe, and I have the freedom and responsibility to fashion it into something called ‘me.’

This has its attraction. It is rather flattering to have so much at stake with so little help from without. Who among us can resist it, at least upon first hearing? The tragedy of the self that emerges from its own center is that it cannot bear the strain. Examine the self endlessly, and the process become permeated with nausea; depend upon it exclusively, and it collapses under the burden; love it solely, and that love destroys it. It cannot

speaking a word of forgiveness that will break its bondage to guilt. It cannot overcome the essential loneliness which tears at the heart. It cannot but rage against the death which is its fate. By myself I cannot even be myself.

Those of you familiar with existentialist literature know that Albert Camus was one of its chief architects. No one has with more force presented the theme that man must assert himself

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like Gold, silver, or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill” (Acts 17:29).

The musician takes her violin and begins to play. Her fingers, arm, her whole being is brought to bear on the fragile instrument; summoned to the creative enterprise. A sound, pure and true, fills the concert hall. The audience sits, rapt, eyes closed. On some cheeks, tears appear. What is happening? What does it mean? Does it declare the greatness of the violin? No. It is the complexities and sensitivities within the musician which are conspiring to produce such an effect upon the audience. Most people of sound mind know that what is so astonishing about art, is the artist.

When Paul offered his critique of idol worship in the city of Athens, he appealed to human intuition that informs us that we are ourselves the most remarkable part of the universe. Possessed of unique capacities, we observe that we inhabit an environment that resonates with those capacities. This makes us suspect a rational connection between ourselves and the way our environment is structured; a connection suggesting it was created with us in view; a connection hinting at an antecedent conscious intellect, the author of our own.


Humans are powerful pointers to the existence of God. Only in human life does the universe contemplate itself. Only humans ponder life’s meaning. Only humans have considered such notions as: “it is better to give than to receive.” Like other animals, humans can be cruel, but only humans have learned to

value humility and sacrifice. Like other animals, humans can be cunning and opportunistic, but only humans have come to respect honesty and charity.

Drain human experience of its consciousness of virtue, of its striving for virtue, its grief over loss of virtue, of its ideological battles—and you have cancelled humanity. If self-consciousness suggests a superior mind of which ours is a reflection, it is reasonable to think that ideas of value which drench human life are a sign pointing to Ultimate Personality, Ultimate Value—God. For if there is no God, our highly wrought sensibilities are a bridge to nowhere; a launch-vehicle into an abyss.

If God is not, our humanness is without a home; that in which we are configured as men and women is essentially unfulfillable. In such a circumstance we are not higher life forms. The ant building its nest is higher than we are because at least it can be fulfilled.

Atheism requires a man/woman to seek validation from that which is manifestly less than himself; from his actions, his work, his craftsmanship, the things he constructs with his own skill. But contentment under these conditions is hard to find. Man’s very humanity yearns for more.

This was Paul’s argument to the men of Athens. It is as apt now as it was then. No matter how brilliant our thoughts, how magnificent our achievements, we who produce them are *more* marvellous. They cannot satisfy us. We flourish best as worshipers, servants and lovers of Him who is greater than all: The God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 

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in an alien world and live out of his own center, for the universe is without one. What you may not know is this: A few months before his untimely death he went and lived among a community of Huguenots, a Protestant communion with its roots in Calvinism. It is said that he had become disenchanted with the vision of a world without values, without meaning, and without purpose. What he found within himself—“he called it once, an invincible summer”—was not enough. Unless what he discovered is buried in an unpublished paper, we shall never know what happened to him in a rigorously Christian community. But perhaps it is enough for us to know

that the lonely self, which he had exalted and loved, was insufficient.

It is the one thing that cannot stand by you ultimately, the one that cannot love you back. It’s hell when all you have is yourself, when the self is the center from which you attempt to live.

While it is hell enough to have one’s life centered on a self that cannot withstand the strain, the anguish is infinitely deepened when that forbids engagement with another’s life as well. That was the rich man’s plight. “At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. The poor man died.” →

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Editor

Ron Allen

Graphic Designer

Debbie O’Brien

Proofreader

Philip Rhodes

Molly Jordan

OVERSEAS ADDRESSES:

Australian office:

P.O. Box 6788
Tweed Heads Sth
NSW 2486, Australia

Canadian offices:

P.O. Box 537
Abbotsford, BC V2S 5Z5
Canada

222 Olive Avenue
Willowdale, ON M2N 4P6
Canada

Jesus and Hell

By Leslie D. Weatherhead

Did Jesus believe in an endless hell? The question can be answered negatively at once; and this for several reasons.

1. There is no word used in the New Testament which warrants us in supposing that Jesus believed in an endless hell. The word *aionios*, used in Matthew 25, could be translated 'age-long.' Our word *aeon* is derived from it. Tennyson transliterates it when he talks about the time it takes to change the contour of the earth's surface: "The sound of streams that swift or slow, drawn down *aeonian* hills, and sow the dust of continents to be."



(Luke 16:20-22). The rich man did not even know that another stood in need of him.

Tennessee Williams wrote: "When you ignore other people completely, that is hell." The most acute form of human misery is when you cannot put yourself aside to "feel deeply for another person."

Who among us has not had at least a taste of that, of having people around and no meaningful relationship to them? We may have the most stylish cut of clothes, a car, the cost of which would support a family for a year, but what joy is it all if we are not connected with one another? The most tragic symbol in our time is the man in a Brooks Brothers suit at the wheel of the latest sports car who is not related deeply to anyone. He has everything—and nothing. Perhaps the worst of it is that, like the rich man, he is so lost in himself that he does not even perceive what he is missing. He never really knew that the occasion for love was lying at his doorstep.

In Albert Camus's, *The Fall*, Jean-Baptiste says in a moment of terrifying insight, "I have no more friends; I have nothing but accomplices. To make up for this, their number have increased; they are the whole human race."

It is one thing to be lonely when you are by yourself, but quite another to be lonely in a crowd—to have only accomplices.

Even this is not the ultimate hell of hell. The real misery of the rich man was that he had no relationship to anything eternal; he was exiled from the very source of life. This is the reality behind the biblical symbol of hell. It's the place where God is not. This is the meaning of the word "Sheol" which we translate "hell." It is the state in

Similarly we speak of the ice-age and the stone-age. We mean a long, long time. We do not mean any period that can be exactly determined by a figure. But we certainly do not mean an endless period.

Further, whatever meaning the concept of time may have in the next world it is incredible that it means numbers of years going on forever. We have to use language about the next world that implies time because we are here imprisoned in time and cannot imagine what life is like outside the prison, either of time or space. But if time has no meaning, or a different valuation, the word 'endless' cannot have the meaning we ascribe to it while we are within the time-prison.

2. This brings us to notice the phrase "*eternal punishment*." If eternal meant 'endless,' the phrase would be self-contradictory, for punishment is not a concept which only implies retribution or a kind of divine revenge. Punishment is a concept that implies making the wrong-doer a right-doer. When the State punishes an offender, the punishment is not only retributive and a deterrent, but surely its main purpose is to make him a useful member of society. The school-master should punish to make the bad boy a good boy. The ideal of punishment is to make punishment unnecessary. Endless punishment cannot possibly do that. We can only bear punishment if we believe it will achieve an end which makes

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which man is utterly separated from his creator...

Without a theistic frame of reference, this is exactly what Jean-Paul-Sartre is representing in *No Exit*. Those who have thought the point of the play was in Garcin's cry, "Hell is other people," have missed the misery the author is depicting. The hell of hell is symbolized in the realization by Garcin when he arrives there that everyone's eyelids are fixed. There is no blink; no possibility of renewal that comes from the rest the eye gets from staring at the world. In hell there is no break-off after which man can start anew...

Though Sartre would not identify it as such, this is life outside the renewing love and grace of God, life that cannot be restored by the presence of his care. A word spoken in anger is not covered over with forgiveness. A deed in violation of another corrupts forever the structure of the relationship. A failure is a failure and never a channel for new beginnings. Death is final without the promise of eternal relatedness. The hell of hell is its distance from the ultimate source of life and its renewing power.

It all begins with the centering of the self upon itself and it moves on to a state where there are no meaningful connections with one another, and reaches its climax in the absence of God himself. Christ descended into hell; into the region of our self-enclosure, into our abortive relationships with one another, and into our very alienation from God. If anyone is in union with that Christ, he is a new being; the old state of things has passed away. The eyelids of our existence can blink again, and find renewal in the love God has for us.

-David Woodyard: LIVING WITHOUT GOD, BEFORE GOD. pp. 72-78.



The Abode of the Dead

By Sheila Cassidy

Over five thousand years ago, three thousand years before the beginnings of Christianity, a group of primitive farmers settled on the fertile plain between two rivers in the land that we now call Iraq. The rivers were the Tigris and the Euphrates and the land between them was called Mesopotamia. It was here that the earliest civilization, the land of Sumer developed between 4000 and 3500 BC.

The Sumerian civilization developed rapidly. There are written records from as early as 3000 BC and from these we learn that the Sumerians were also a people with a highly developed theological system.

Their basic idea was simple: the major natural forces, earth and sky, water, wind, fire and so on, were personified and endowed with enormous power, including the power of eternal life.

Just as the Sumerians made sense of their life by a supernatural world of gods of the living, they made sense of death by developing the concept of the underworld, a terrible land of no return, the land of the dead.

We get a glimpse of this land of shadows when Enkidu, the companion of the ancient Sumerian hero, Gilgamesh, is allowed to visit it and return. It was a sad picture. In these regions of eternal darkness the souls of the dead—*edimmu*—“clad like birds in a garment of wings,” are all jumbled together.

“In the house of dust live Lord and priest; live the wizard and prophet; live those whom the great gods have anointed in the abyss. Dust is their nourishment, and their food is mud.”

This ancient Sumerian image of the dwelling-place of the dead is considered to be the common source of later mythological visions of the universe of both East and West, and it is from these ideas that the Old Testament concept of Sheol, or Hades (hell) was developed.

We first hear mention of Sheol in Genesis when, after the apparent death of his beloved son Joseph, Jacob mourns: *“I will go down in mourning to Sheol beside my son”*

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their suffering worthwhile. If hell is endless, it is valueless. If punishment is endless, when is its victim to have a chance of becoming good? His condition is hopeless. Punishment often leads to penitence and a new beginning. When can the victim of an endless punishment begin again? Suffering from which nothing can be learned, nothing gained, is meaningless and he who inflicted it would be a fiend, not a father.

3. This leads to a third point which, by itself, answers the question. Sin is the most dreadful fact in the universe. At the same time, God is a father, and Jesus not only called him by that name, but taught men that they could best understand him in terms of that figure.

No father, whatever his child did, would go on punishing him for the rest of his life. Yet that would be merciful compared to the action of a God who, for sins committed even over a long period of human life—which, after all, is brief in

(Genesis 37:34). It seems that this concept of Sheol or the underworld as a place for the dead was common currency among a diverse group of peoples. We get the clearest picture of it from Greek mythology where Sheol is known as Hades, the mournful abode where, separated from their bodies, the souls of those who had finished their earthly existence took refuge.

It is a small wonder that the first Christians were excited at the rumours that Christ had descended among the dead, that he had stormed the gates of hell (Hades) and set the captives free. It seems that the theological concept that Christ, in rising from the dead, had conquered death forever, was illustrated by the early Christians as the victorious Messiah, the avenging God, physically breaking down the gates of hell (Hades or Sheol), and rescuing the spirits of the virtuous dead.

-Sheila Cassidy: GOOD FRIDAY PEOPLE. pp. 154-158. 



the perspective of eternity—punished his child endlessly. We can hardly suppose a thing true of God for which a man would be put into jail or into a criminal lunatic asylum. *“If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more will your heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him”* (Luke 11:13).

No wise father seeks to win his child by a fear motive. It is right to reverence God and have awe in our hearts when we think of him.... But a cringing, sycophantic fear is unworthy in us and not asked for by him. Like a human father, God does not want to win us by that method. Like a human father, he would rather fail. God would not win us by a method which, either on our part or his denies the nature of the relationship into which he calls us...

-Leslie D. Weatherhead: WHEN THE LAMP FLICKERS, pp. 224-227. 