

Understanding Hell & Judgment

DAVE BAST

Any Christian who has ever made an honest attempt to communicate their faith in Jesus Christ has probably heard this objection: How can you believe in a God who lets people go to hell? What kind of God is that? Well, today we want to work together to try to formulate an answer to exactly this question. What kind of God allows people – or worse – sends people to hell? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and joining me once again today as my co-host is Meg Jenista.

MEG JENISTA

Hello. It is good to be back.

DAVE BAST

So, Meg; we planned this series of four programs on the four last things, which are the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, judgment – the last judgment – and the new creation or heaven. I have to tell you, this is the one I do not want to do because we have to talk about hell.

Before we even get into it, though; here is a background question for all of us, I think, as Christians. Do you have the kind of God who can tell you things you do not want to hear? Are you able to listen to the Bible and let it say things to you that are unpleasant or that you even object to, or that you maybe do not understand, but because it is the Bible, you say okay. Or are you the kind of Christian who just picks the nice parts out, the parts that we all like and love: Oh, it is just about Jesus and how great a guy he is.

MEG JENISTA

Well, I think you have picked two extremes, and I think most Christians fall somewhere in the middle where eventually we may come into a place where we understand what scripture means and says; but let's be honest about the fact that there are parts of the Bible that cause us to wrestle; that cause us to doubt; that we do not like on the surface of them. I think that is what today's program is about is the wrestling; taking God's word seriously enough to let it shape and change us, but not so that we snap our fingers and say: Okay, well then, that is fine; and mindlessly follow.

DAVE BAST

I think we also have to be really careful how we even talk about this subject. I remember years ago running across a line, I think it was by D. L. Moody, the great evangelist, who said, "No preacher should ever talk about hell without tears."

MEG JENISTA

Absolutely.

DAVE BAST

Either real tears, or at least tears in your voice. Our culture jokes about it. They have made a joke about it. It is really hard to talk about this, even, seriously because think of all the cartoons you have seen with Satan and a pitchfork and flames coming out...

MEG JENISTA

Right; and the scratchy wool, flannel onesie pajamas.

DAVE BAST

It has become a subject of countless jokes about hell.

MEG JENISTA

Right; and Christians who take hell seriously become a part of that joke or that caricature because there are – more than I would like to admit – there are more Christians out there who are saying things about who is in and who is out very dogmatically, in a way that is going to turn people away.

DAVE BAST

They are embarrassing. So, if we try to talk about it we immediately run the risk of being lumped in with somebody with a bullhorn on a street corner screaming at people – turn or burn. And that only makes it an unserious thing for most people. They look at it and they just throw up their hands and say: It is something nuts are interested in.

MEG JENISTA

I guess the question is: Can we believe in hell and not be jerks?

DAVE BAST

Well, I hope so because I do not want to be a jerk.

MEG JENISTA

Me neither.

DAVE BAST

And I want to be as faithful as I can to scripture, and also to the character of God. I think that is where we need to end up.

MEG JENISTA

Who is this God?

DAVE BAST

On this subject, yes. Is God capable of doing this? And does that detract somehow from his love, his grace? This is certainly a subject that lends itself to caricature; not only on the conservative side, but on the liberal side, too. It is easy to make – and people do; they mock the very idea that there could be an eternal destiny of horror for any human being if there is a loving God.

MEG JENISTA

Right; and then we have to contend with scripture, which is, I think, where we want to go on this program; and so, we should begin in Revelation with its picture of what judgment will look like. This is from Revelation 20:

⁷When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. ⁹They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them ¹⁰and the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be ever tormented day and night forever and ever.

And John also says that

¹²he saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the Book of Life; the dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the

books. ¹³The sea gave up the dead that were in it and Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them and everyone was judged according to what they had done. ¹⁴Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵All whose names were not found written in the Book of Life were thrown into the lake of fire.

DAVE BAST

Okay; there it is, and there is an awful lot there – a lot of symbolic language, but that is the central image of the last judgment and a separation of humanity – those whose names are in the Book of Life; those whose names are not in the Book of Life; and they share – that latter category shares the fate of the devil and Death and Hades; symbolic language, to be sure.

MEG JENISTA

Right; remember it is poetic language. It is meant to be evocative. It is meant to make us feel the tension and the despair, the hopelessness that comes along with the reality of judgment and the reality of hell. But one thing that we cannot say from this passage is whose names are written in which book; and I think that is when Christians verge on getting it wrong is when we are very dogmatic about the names written in either book.

DAVE BAST

I think to be faithful to scripture we have to acknowledge the reality and existence of the last judgment and of hell.

MEG JENISTA

Absolutely.

DAVE BAST

Of eternal punishment, or may be better to use the Bible's phrase: The second death; which is horrible. But we do not have the right – let alone the responsibility – of trying to figure out who is there and who is not, and who is in. Especially, we have no authority to make any judgment about any particular individual because we just do not know. We do not know enough, and that is not our business; that is God's business. But let's talk a little bit about these images. There is the fire, a lake made out of fire – how do you conceive of that – and Satan is a real creature and people are real, but death is not a real being; Hades is not a real being – the abode of the dead – so there is some mysterious symbolism here.

MEG JENISTA

There is, and so, it is not intended to be something that you take and then try to map out. I think the conclusion we need to come to is two-fold: First of all, that hell is some place we do not want to be. That is certainly what John saw and communicated to us. It is some place we do not want to be, and it is some place we do not want to be because God will not be present there.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; you know, Jesus used symbolism as well for the final state of those who reject God, and he spoke in terms of outer darkness; so, just taking those two things: Fire is light; darkness is dark; they cannot both be literally present. There is a wonderful passage – wonderful is not the right word – horrible is the right word – but a very eloquent passage in one of John Dunn's sermons, where he points out this very fact, that hell is to be cut off from the Lord, who is light, and the Lord of Life, and to be cut off from him eternally; and he says: Fire, brimstone – that is like pleasure compared to the reality. The reality is far worse than any symbols. Just like the symbols of heaven in Revelation – the streets of gold, the pearly gate – they are intended to give us this uplifting – imagining what we cannot imagine – picture of joy and glory. So, the symbols of hell are meant to help us try to imagine what we cannot imagine, which is the horror of losing God.

MEG JENISTA

It is interesting to me as well because we can begin to imagine heaven because God's presence is real in the creation. That we as human beings are created in God's image and so much of our creation, while broken, still reflects the nature and the character and the beauty and the presence of God. So we maybe have a starting point to begin to imagine heaven, but if we were to erase and eradicate all of that from our creation, I do not even know how to begin conceptualizing that; and so, John at least, has a leg up on me that he has some images to use.

DAVE BAST

Okay; so if the images of hell are just that, they are images; they are not meant to be taken literally; what about the thing itself? Maybe that is an image, too. Maybe it is not literally true or real. Maybe it is just a warning. What do you think about that?

MEG JENISTA

Well, there are certainly people who would love that interpretation, but there are passages about judgment beyond the evocative poetry and apocalyptic literature of Revelation. There are other texts of scripture that speak to the reality of judgment and we will need to get to those when we return from our break.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

MEG JENISTA

And I am Meg Jenista. Before the break we were talking about the poetic imagery meant to evoke a response – a visceral, negative response – to the reality of hell; but now, we need to ask the question if hell is portrayed for us most often poetically, then is the judgment just some sort of poetry or esoteric, amorphous thing?

DAVE BAST

A symbol, a symbol maybe of something or other. I remember years ago running across an essay by somebody who referred to Matthew 25 – Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats, and said: I cannot believe that those are two different kinds of people. That must refer to the good and bad in each of us. So, the judgment means God will just get rid of the bad in each of us and everybody is in. And I thought, whoa, friend. I think you are pushing that a little too far. Jesus clearly is talking about two groups of people who are actually, as John says in Revelation 20, they are judged according to their works; according to what they have done.

MEG JENISTA

It is interesting. I remember the first time I preached this passage and I thought I was going to get a straight-up, come to Jesus sermon, and I had to wrestle with the fact that the text does seem to indicate that we are judged according to what we do, which is problematic for us Protestants and Evangelicals who put a great stock in being judged according to what we believe, and ultimately being judged according to our faith in Jesus Christ. How does that work?

DAVE BAST

Well, I think you know and I know that faith is proved more in actions than with words; that words are cheap. The great Reformed preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, of the 19th Century, once said that faith that does not change your behavior will never change your destiny; and he is following James in that, isn't he? Paul says we are justified by faith; James says faith without works is dead. It is not real faith. So, yes; saved by grace through faith in Christ, but judged according to works – ouch! That is not comfortable.

MEG JENISTA

No. It reminds me of some of the best dating advice I ever got from a friend who said: You put the mute button on for the first six months because anyone can say anything, but you watch character and integrity and behavior. I think it applies as well – which could lead us to judge one another or it could lead us to take our hands off and leave the judgment to God, and recognize that God is working in hearts and minds and lives and souls, and we cannot even begin to comprehend and judge that.

DAVE BAST

Okay, I agree. So, we should not judge individuals. We do not know enough, but what about God? Does he have the right to judge? Or does somehow God in his infinite wisdom let everybody slide through or everything gets understood; everything gets forgiven in the end.

MEG JENISTA

Right; because if God is nice and God is loving, then...

DAVE BAST

Maybe gracious is a little stronger word than nice.

MEG JENISTA

Yes, if God is gracious, then everyone gets in in the end; and in fact, Romans 5:18 seems to suggest that, which reads:

¹⁸Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all. How do we read that *all*?

DAVE BAST

That is the key question in that text. The short answer is I think Paul means he is contrasting Christ and Adam; all human beings somehow share in Adam's fall, Adam's sin and subsequent condemnation; but it is pretty clear that if we take the Bible as a whole seriously, we cannot say that all people automatically share in Christ's redemption; and so, I think he means that all those who belong to Christ are justified in that sense. All in Adam are condemned – and that is everybody – all in Christ are saved, but that is not necessarily everybody because some people choose not to put themselves there.

MEG JENISTA

Right; and you also have to remember Paul's concern in Romans was demonstrated in the first few chapters that the Jews stand condemned under the law; and even those who did not have the law, whether they were gentiles or other ethnicities or religions, they all fall under the condemnation of the weight of their own sin.

DAVE BAST

We cannot just take one isolated verse out and say, "See, that proves it." It is hard for me to imagine that Paul could have meant that everyone is in automatically because of what Christ did in Romans 5, when he says a little bit later in Romans 9: I love my people so much, I wish I were accursed instead of them if it would only mean that they could belong to Christ and receive this. So, we are saying what, in the space of a few chapters Paul says things completely opposite? I don't think so.

MEG JENISTA

I had a professor in seminary who told us that if you want to believe in judgment you are going to have trouble with Romans 5:18; but if you want to believe in Universalism, you are going to have problems with the rest of the Bible.

DAVE BAST

Exactly. What I really want to do next, though, is talk about what this tells us about the character of God; if God is a God who will judge, what then?

MEG JENISTA

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Meg Jenista.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Meg, we have been struggling to talk – intelligibly, we hope – about the Biblical teaching of the last judgment and the reality of hell. It is not easy to talk about, but the Bible does, and we want to believe as carefully as we can in what the Bible says. But, this is not all bad news, the idea that there is a judgment...

MEG JENISTA

It really isn't. I think it is hard for many of us, especially in the North American context, we may live on a cul-de-sac with genuinely nice people who have various, different faith beliefs or no particular faith belief at all, and it is very hard for us to think that the neighbor who lends us his pruning shears is, by virtue of not having faith in Christ, going to be going to hell. That is a hard concept for us in our context, but I think it is important to remember that there are other contexts in which the Gospel is read, and there are victims of violent crimes who never receive justice in this life; there are victims of war crimes who have been through horrible, horrible tragedies that will never be judged in this life; and the idea of telling them, hey, it's not a big deal. God loves everyone and everyone is going to get into heaven in the end is horrible news; catastrophic news; devastating news!

DAVE BAST

Yes; what kind of God would ever send anyone to hell? That is the question we started with. Well, what kind of God would look out at a world of brutality and injustice and awful things done and done in secret that nobody knows about; it is never discovered even; it is never punished. What kind of a God would wink at that and say: Oh, it's all okay.

One of the great stories in the Bible on this score is the story of David and Bathsheba. You know the story; I know the story; presumably most of our listeners know the story: David gets away with it. He seduces this neighbor girl and kills her husband and who is going to do anything because he is the king. And the last line in the story says: But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord. And there is the punch line. So God will not allow evil to go unnoticed, unchecked, unrequited.

MEG JENISTA

Absolutely; and that is the gift that we receive from the Minor Prophets is the reality that God is on the side of the oppressed and the people who will never receive justice in this life. They can have faith in a God of justice and mercy who takes their story seriously and will have something to say about it at the last day.

Dave Bast:

I think there is another really important factor that we bear in mind as we think about any individual's fate for all eternity. We have already tried to stress the point that a lot of the language is imagery and symbolism and we do not know exactly what the reality will be, but I think it is also important to stress the fact that people ultimately will choose for themselves what destiny they want. I do not think anybody is going to be caught up by surprise at this because we are all – all the time – we are either living toward God in humility and repentance – we are saying, along with Peter, my favorite line, I think, in the Bible: Lord, where else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Lord, I have screwed up. I have made a mess out of my life. I know I am not worthy, but I have nowhere else to go. I keep turning to You.

Or the pride that says: I do not want God. I do not need God. Heaven is God's presence; hell is God's absence. If you choose not to want God's presence, what are you going to get?

MEG JENISTA

It is interesting to think of our life on earth as acclimating ourselves for our future destiny; and so, if I am acclimating myself, if I am adjusting myself to beauty and justice and to mercy, then when I enter heaven it is going to make sense and I am going to feel at home; but if you have spent your whole life pursuing

selfishness and pride and your own gain to the detriment of others, if you were get into heaven you would feel so uncomfortable and out of place there that you would actually prefer, you would actually choose hell because it is what you have been acclimating yourself to your whole life long.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the simple definition is that heaven is the enjoyment of God, but for people who do not enjoy God, that would not be heaven.

I know you have read *The Great Divorce* by C. S. Lewis.

MEG JENISTA

Love *The Great Divorce*. I can not recommend it more highly.

DAVE BAST

It is a great book. He has this picture of hell as a dreary suburb where each soul keeps moving farther and farther away from its neighbors.

MEG JENISTA

And they do not even notice; they do not even feel particularly tormented. You look at them and you think, this is horrible, but they don't see it that way.

DAVE BAST

Because this is what they choose. If you worship yourself, pretty soon that is all you have left is yourself. Chesterton – the great G. K. Chesterton – says somewhere that if you set out to enjoy yourself, eventually that is all you can enjoy. You cannot enjoy anything else, including God; so you are left with yourself, and that is hell.

In a real sense, I think that God in his judgment will confirm that choice. That will be an awful thing; but people who end up in hell do so because they have chosen it; they have chosen it for themselves.

MEG JENISTA

And C. S. Lewis speaks to this, really poignantly I think, and he says that we are half-hearted creatures fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us. So, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by an offer of a holiday at the sea, we are far too easily pleased.

DAVE BAST

Far too easily pleased... What he means is that we were really built to know God – that is our ultimate joy and satisfaction, and if we settle for something less than God or if we choose other than God, if we go down that way of self, we end up with nothing; but if we move toward God, we end with infinite joy.

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation today, and do not forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Finding us is easy; just go to groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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Printed on July 26, 2025