

INTRODUCTION

There are many theories about the afterlife. Some people believe in reincarnation. Three men died and stood before God, who asked them how they wanted to spend their next life on earth. The first man said, "I want to come back as myself, but I want to be 10 times smarter." "Poof," God made him 10 times smarter. The second guy said, "That's a good idea. Send me back, but this time I want to be 100 times smarter." And "Poof" God send him back 100 times smarter. The third guy said, "We've got a good thing going, so send me back 1,000 times smarter." And "Poof" God made him a woman.

I don't think people are reincarnated. In this passage today, Jesus talks about a place called hell. Nobody likes to talk about hell, and it's probably been a long time since you heard a message about hell. I borrowed the title of this message from John Lennon's 1971 song "Imagine." It's the ultimate existentialism theme song. A couple of the verses say, "Imagine there's no heaven. It's easy if you try. No hell below us, above us only sky. Imagine all the people living for today. Imagine there's no countries (we'll excuse the grammatical mistake). It isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for; and no religion too. Imagine all the people living life in peace." Yes, he was a dreamer. But his dream ended in 1980 when he was shot in New York City. I wonder if John Lennon could stand here today, if his opinion about the afterlife would be different than his song.

I would much rather preach on heaven than hell. Two years ago I preached an entire series called, "Heaven: An Insider's Guidem" which you can find on our website.

But one of the values of teaching through the Bible verse-by-verse is that I can't practice what I call "kangaroo exegesis," where you just hop over and ignore the unpleasant passages of the Bible.

The context of this passage is important. The disciples of Jesus had been arguing about who was the greatest? To prove a point, Jesus took a little child in His arms and said, "If you want to be great, you must humble yourself as a child. Then He continued,

Mark 9:42-49. "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. 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.' Everyone will be salted with fire."

No pun intended, but unless you've been under a rock somewhere, you probably have heard the true story of Aron Ralston. In 2003 he was hiking alone when a huge boulder came dislodged and trapped him in a narrow canyon. After 127 hours of trying to get out, he had to make a decision about life and death. In an act of incredible determination, he used his pocketknife to cut

off his right arm. He wrote a book entitled *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* and is now a motivational speaker.

In this passage, Jesus wasn't speaking about literally cutting off your hands or feet or gouging out your eye. He was employing extreme hyperbole to talk about the difference between enjoying what He called "entering life" and experiencing the agonies of hell. He said it would be better to go through life maimed than to be thrown into hell.

The source of your sin problem isn't your hands, your feet, or your eyes. In Mark 7 Jesus made it clear the source of sin is our wicked heart. The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. This passage isn't about amputation; it's about the extreme agony of hell. Cutting off your hand is pretty agonizing, but it is a cakewalk compared to the horrors of hell.

Let's talk about hell. I know you don't want to, because it is an unpleasant subject. So is cancer. But a loving doctor will be honest to his or her patients about cancer.

When it comes to belief in heaven and hell, Americans are fickle. According to the Barna Research group, 71% of Americans believe in heaven. But less than half of that number, 32% believe that hell is a literal place of torment. And when asked, only 2% of Americans say they expect to end up in hell.

So most Americans are taking John Lennon's advice. They are imagining there is no hell below us. Now, you might expect non-Christians to deny the existence of hell. But there are many people calling themselves Christians who have imagined away hell.

Some popular preachers today have questioned the reality of hell. For instance, Rob Bell, the founding pastor of Mars Hill Church in Michigan wrote a book entitled *Love Wins* in which he basically denies the existence of hell.

He writes: "A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, and forgiveness." Rob Bell is a remarkable communicator, and he has a right to believe whatever he wants. And you may believe as he does. That's your right. But one of the most important issues that you'll ever have to settle for yourself is whether or not you believe in the existence of heaven and hell.

So, for the first part of this message, let's take the position of John Lennon and Rob Bell. Let's imagine there is no hell. After all 2/3 of Americans can't be wrong about this can they?

As we pursue this line of thought about eliminating the idea of hell, lest you take me literally, I do believe in the existence of heaven and hell. I'm just going to tell you what you have to do if you want to eliminate the distasteful idea of hell. So here are four ways to eliminate hell in your thinking.

1. THROW AWAY YOUR BIBLE

If you're going to get rid of hell, toss this book away. It is filled with references to the eternal punishment of those who reject God's offer of eternal life.

Liberal theology crept into Protestant seminaries and colleges around the beginning of the 20th Century. These liberal theologians apologized for Biblical truth and felt called to rescue Christianity from its historical roots. The first doctrine to fall was the inspiration of the Bible. Suddenly, it was no longer the inspired Word of God; it was a collection of writings of men. The next doctrine to fall was that of hell. They claimed that the doctrine of hell slandered the character of God. Popular preachers like Harry Emerson Fosdick preached against the reality of hell. Fosdick was pastor of Riverside Church in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s. He mocked Jonathan Edward's sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" by claiming, "Surely we don't believe in a God like that anymore."

So, if you're going to imagine away hell, you've got to toss out these and other scriptures. The Bible says, "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." (Revelation 20:15) And while you're tossing that verse away, go ahead and toss away Revelation 21:8 which says, "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death." (Revelation 21:8)

That doesn't sound very nice to me, does it? Let's bring back John Lennon and the nice thoughts of "no hell below us." Now don't you feel better?

This book is full of warnings about judgment and hell. Maybe we should stick with those self-help books like "How to be Happy in Three Days or Less." But for goodness sake, if you want to eliminate hell, toss your Bible.

2. IGNORE THE WORDS OF JESUS

The day Jesus was born, the angels announced to the Shepherds, "Today in the city of David a Savior has been born, who is Christ the Lord." Wait. If you're going to eliminate hell, there's no need of a Savior. There's nothing to be saved from.

Jesus spoke about hell more than any other individual in the Bible. The word Jesus used for hell was *gehenna*, which was a comparison to a valley in Jerusalem which is called Ge-Hinnom in Hebrew. The valley still exists in Jerusalem today, and nobody would dare build or live in it. Whenever we're driving around Jerusalem in our tour bus, our guide, Reuven, who is originally from Australia, will say, "Folks, and to the left, we see hell. The valley of Ge-Hinnom where the pagan people practiced child sacrifice and the bodies of unclaimed corpses would burn with a stench and smoke that rose without end."

Now Jesus didn't say that valley was hell, but it was the worst place imaginable in Israel, so Jesus compared it to the place of eternal torment. So, if you're going to get rid of hell, you just have to ignore everything Jesus said about it.

You're going to have to ignore these three statements along with many others. "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) "In hell, where he was in torment [the rich man] looked up...and said, 'Have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'" (Luke 16:23-24) "They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 13:42)

Oooh. That's harsh. Let's listen to John Lennon again. Imagine everyone living in peace. Yes, that's much better.

3. AVOID CRAZY CHRISTIANS

There are plenty of nut-case Christians out there who are always talking about hell. They witness to people because they don't want them to go to hell. I mentioned Jonathan Edwards. He wasn't some backwoods hick. He was a Yale University valedictorian at the age of 17. In addition to theology, he was fascinated by science and wrote papers on light and optics. He first preached his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in 1741 and it led to the first great spiritual awakening in America. If Jonathan Edwards were here today, he'd be labeled a nut case for preaching such a scary sermon.

But the one man who has preached to more people than anyone else in history is Billy Graham. Some people have falsely claimed that he doesn't believe in hell. In a sermon he preached at a Crusade in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1958 he said, "Jesus warned us in no uncertain terms against going to hell. And He used the most terrible language to describe it. The Bible calls it the second death. The Bible calls it a lake of fire and brimstone. I believe that one minute after death those outside of Christ will discover the horrible mistake they have made; and they will say, 'My God, my God.'"

And in January of this year, at age 96 he said, "When Christians die they go straight into the presence of Christ. But an unsaved sinner's destiny is separation from God, a place Jesus called hell."

Pretty harsh, huh? I'd much rather listen to someone positive, smooth, and smiling like Joel Osteen. He says he believes in hell, but he never talks about it because it's too unpleasant. Instead, "God wants you to be wealthy, happy, and healthy."

There's one another way to avoid the idea of hell.

4. NEVER DIE

Of course, people are living longer than ever before. Fitness is a good thing and we should all choose to live healthy lives and extend the usefulness of our bodies, the temple of the Holy Spirit.

But there are many who think death is something to be feared and avoided at any and all costs. They want to live forever, but not in heaven, and certainly not in hell.

How can you do that? Well, there is an organization in Scottsdale, Arizona called the Alcor Life Extension Foundation. When you die, they will freeze your entire body and preserve it until a time in the future when they predict medical science will be so advanced they can fix whatever caused you to die. Then you'll be thawed and revived. How much does this cost? Well, for whole body preservation you've got to lay out \$200,000. But if you just want your head preserved, it's a bargain at \$80,000. They currently have 134 clients in the deep-freeze; one of whom is believed to be baseball star Ted Williams. Of the 134, over half of them are just the heads. So, if you want to get rid of hell, just don't die. Simple huh?

That's going to be tough to do because the Bible says, "It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that the judgment." (Hebrews 9:27) And "The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away." (Psalm 90:10)

So if the idea of hell is repulsive to you. Go ahead and take John Lennon's advice. Imagine there is no hell.

To be honest, if you want to reject the idea of hell, you do so at your own risk. It is the popular American belief today that there are no absolute truths—that all truth is relative. That means, what may be truth to you is not truth to me. There are relative truths. For instance, depending on what part of the country you live in 60 degrees may be considered a cool temperature or it may be a warm temperature. That's relative. Some people believe Dunkin' Donuts are the best, and obviously they are deceived because Krispy Kreme are the best donuts. That's a relative truth. But some truths are absolute. You can disagree over the best donut, but it is an absolute truth that if you eat a dozen donuts a day and don't exercise, you'll get fat.

The truth about hell is not a relative truth. It is an absolute truth. Either it is true, or it is a lie. There's no middle ground. Now, as I mentioned earlier, I believe in hell. But God has gone to extraordinary lengths to prevent you from spending eternity there.

During the recent floods in Texas, there have been some dangerous highways. Some of them have led to deep, dangerous waters and people have lost their lives. As soon as possible, traffic officials place roadblocks on those dangerous roads so that people no longer follow them. Jesus said there is a dangerous road that leads to death and destruction. But God has erected plenty of roadblocks to warn people. Jesus said, "Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it." (Matthew 7:13) Let me mention at least three roadblocks to hell.

Roadblock #1: God's Will

God doesn't want anyone to go to hell. The Bible says, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

Jesus said in Matthew 25:41 that hell was prepared for the devil and his angels. It was never intended for human habitation. You say, "Well if it's God's will for everyone to be saved, won't everyone be saved?" No, God's will is not always done on earth as it is in heaven. That's why Jesus taught us to pray for God's will to be done. There is one area of the universe where God has voluntarily restricted his control, and that is in the area of your will. He didn't create Adam and Eve so they COULD not sin. He gave them a free will. And God won't force anyone to accept His offer of eternal life. He will not override your will.

Roadblock #2: The witness of concerned Christians

The Apostle Paul was speaking in Athens (Greece, not Texas). He was addressing the most intellectually astute philosophers of the First Century. He said, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:30-31)

In Luke 16, Jesus talked a rich man who died and woke up in hell. He cried out to Abraham for help. And Abraham said two of the scariest words that anyone in hell could ever hear, "Son, remember..." I believe that if someone dies without accepting Jesus, they will remember every experience when a Christian witnessed to them. They will remember every Gospel message they've ever heard, including this one. As you listen to my words today in person or online, God is using me to warn you about the reality of hell. I am one of God's roadblocks warning you to turn around.

Roadblock #3: The cross of Christ

The Bible says, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:6)

The cross stands as a mighty roadblock warning you away from hell. Jesus took our punishment. He took the bullet for us. He drank the cup of God's wrath so we don't have to. When Jesus died on the cross, He experienced hell. Hell is darkness. The Bible says when Jesus was dying, it became dark at noon. Hell is separation from God. And when Jesus took my sins and your sins upon Himself, He experienced an alienation from His Father. He cried out, "My God, my God WHY have you forsaken me?" Jesus endured hell, so that we don't have to. Will you accept the finished work of Christ on the cross?

CONCLUSION

Going back to John Lennon's song, it takes a lot of imagination to explain away heaven and hell. In 1968, the rock group Blood Sweat and Tears recorded a song entitled, "And When I Die." The song was first recorded two years earlier by Peter, Paul, and Mary. The song said, "I swear there ain't no heaven; and I pray there ain't no hell. But I'll never know by livin'; only my dying will tell." Let me plead with you: *Don't wait until after you die to learn the truth about heaven and hell.* Trust Jesus today while you have the opportunity.

In 1830, George Wilson was convicted of robbing the U.S. postal service. He was sentenced to death. Thinking that the punishment was too harsh, President Andrew Jackson issued a pardon for George Wilson. But Wilson refused the pardon. The Attorney General said, "But you HAVE to accept it." Wilson disagreed and the case went to the Supreme Court where Chief Justice John Marshall ruled in favor of Wilson. He wrote, "A pardon is a deed...and delivery is not complete without acceptance. It may then be rejected by the person to whom it is tendered, and if it be rejected, we have discovered no power in a court to force it on him." (U.S. v. George Wilson, 7 Pet.150, 8 L.Ed. 640) George Wilson was hanged. You may think it cruel that a court would hang a man who robbed the Postal Service. But George Wilson didn't have to die. He chose to reject the offer of a pardon.

God is offering you a pardon from hell today. He is offering you forgiveness and hope. The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death (separation from God), but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23) Will you accept His gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ? He wants you to be saved. But He leaves the choice to you.

OUTLINE

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2. Ignore the words of Jesus.
3. Avoid crazy Christians.
4. Never die.

God's Roadblocks to Hell

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1. God's Will

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2. The witness of concerned Christians

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What Americans believe

71% believe in heaven
32% believe hell is a literal place of torment
2% expect to end up in hell

(Source: Barna Group)

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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