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Luke 16:22-23, ESV.

The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

A Dead Man's Address Book: *Go to Hell?*

Consider the following from the 5th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.

This quote has the word “hell” in it. But the word that is translated to “hell” is not a literal Greek word for “Hell”. There is no true biblical Greek word that corresponds directly to our word for Hell. When Jesus is delivering what we call his Sermon on the Mount, which begins with the Beatitudes, to a large crowd, and he tells them that they are better off being blinded in an eye than sinning with that eye and ending up in Hell, what the original Greek really says is this:

*²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into **Gehenna**.*

“Gehenna” is not literally hell. It is a physical place where people at one point dumped garbage. It is in present-day Jerusalem. It was also called the Valley of

Hinnom, and in the Book of Jeremiah, Israelites who had fallen into pagan practices were said to have built shrines to the pagan god Baal in the Valley of Hinnom and used these shrines to sacrifice their children to Baal. What our passage from Matthew literally says is that we are better off being blinded in an eye than sinning with that eye and ending up in this garbage dump of a place where people used to sacrifice their children to a pagan God. We might logically argue that this is a metaphorical way of referring to Hell, and that is what most Bible translators have decided. But is this what the original writers of the Greek Scriptures were trying to suggest? The point is this. “Hell” is a modern English word and not a direct translation from any word in the Bible. But it is true that Jesus uses the word “Gehenna” eleven times to refer to a place of punishment.

Now, consider this from the 16th chapter of the Gospel of Luke:

The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

This is from a famous parable, one that we call the Rich Man and Lazarus. In this story, there is a rich man who dressed in fine linen and purple. Now, linen was expensive and so was purple dye, and so the fact that this man wore linen and purple every day meant that he was displaying his wealth for all to see. But there is a poor man named Lazarus who shows up at the rich man’s gate, looking for

handouts, but the rich man does not help him. Lazarus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Eleazar, which means “God helps” or “God supports” or “God provides for”. Clearly, by naming this person Lazarus, Jesus is saying that God cares more for this poor man than God does for the rich man. But to the rich man, Lazarus is just another beggar. The day comes when Lazarus dies. Angels carry him to be in Abraham’s “*kolpos*” or bosom. This suggests that Abraham, one of the oldest and most loved characters of the Old Testament, will now care for Lazarus, and to us, it means he is in Heaven. Next, though, the rich man dies. Our wealthy guy ends up in Hades, which is a Greek word that is very similar in meaning to the Old Testament Hebrew word *Sheol*. They both essentially mean “the place of the dead”, and this is the only time that Jesus refers to Hades or Sheol. It is not Hell. It is a place where the dead go for some period of time, probably finite – and all dead people go there, not just the righteous or the unrighteous. Importantly, we do not know what Aramaic word Jesus used; remember he spoke Aramaic, but the Gospels are written in Greek. Our best guess is that Jesus did not use the word Gehenna or the Greek manuscripts would have used this word, and so perhaps Jesus used the word Sheol. One of two things must be true. First, perhaps Jesus saw the temporary place where we go, Hades or Sheol, as different from the permanent place, Gehenna or some form of

Hell. Or perhaps Jesus wasn't trying to teach us about the afterlife in this story. Maybe he didn't believe in a temporary holding place at all, and he was simply using an old Israelite concept, Sheol, in his parable because he knew that people of his day would be able to relate to this concept. We don't know which of these are true: Did Jesus believe in some sort of permanent place of punishment only, or did he believe that there was a temporary place, followed by either Heaven or Hell? And did Jesus believe that Hell consisted of a truly eternal place of suffering (which is the conventional notion today), or did Jesus believe that Hell consisted of a complete annihilation of a human, and only those in Heaven live for eternity?

I would like to consider what the Bible, specifically the New Testament, tells us about this place we call Hell. Is our interpretation correct, that if we commit grave sins and do not seek forgiveness before we die, we will end up for eternity in some garbage dump of a place that's no better than a shrine where children are sacrificed to a pagan god? There are three theories as to what the Bible is trying to tell us about Hell. But first, I'd like to talk about my father's father.

I've mentioned him before. He left to serve in the trenches in World War I when my father was two. He must have seen some very horrible stuff. When he came home from the war, he did not return to his wife and child. He ran off and spent the rest of his life living on the street in Quebec. My father spent several

decades trying to find him but never did. Then, when I was twelve, my father learned that his father was dead. We were living in Oxnard, California, and my father got a letter from the police chief in Val d'Or, Quebec, the Valley of Gold, an old gold mining town about halfway up Quebec – a very cold place in the winter. The letter was in French, and as my father opened the letter, and realized what it was, he wondered: how had the cops in Val d'Or found him in California?

Biblical theory number 1, about Hell, is called “Annihilationism”. In 1st Timothy, we are told that God “*alone has immortality*”. That would seem to back up the theory that when we die, we do not necessarily gain immortality, and that some of us cease to exist entirely. Many early church theologians believed this, that Hell consisted of being annihilated. John, in Chapter 3, says the following:

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

These are the words of Jesus. This could be interpreted to mean that those who do not go to Heaven are destroyed. Eternal life does not exist in Hell.

Likewise, in Chapter 13 of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says:

⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Further, it would seem from the Bible that this decision does not happen immediately when we die. Multiple statements in the Bible suggest that evil

people will not be annihilated until the End Times, when Jesus returns. We are told in Acts 24 that at this time, *“... there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.”* Gehenna, or Hell, is apparently called the Lake of Fire in the Book of Revelation. In Chapter 20, we are told that when Jesus comes again, there will be a book that will reveal who is saved and who is destroyed:

¹⁵ And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Let’s move on to the second theory, which corresponds to the traditional Protestant view of Hell. This says that at the End Times, the righteous will go to Heaven and the unrighteous will spend eternity in Hell. They are not annihilated. Many Protestant sects, specifically most Methodists, see this eternity in Hell as consisting of an eternal separation from God, not some horrible place where we burn forever. But either way, this theory is called “Eternal Punishment”. This is what Jesus says in Chapter 11 of the Gospel of Matthew:

²⁴ But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”

This does seem more like a warning of torment than of annihilation.

Let’s look at the third option, which is called “Restorationism”, and this theory suggests that when we die, even the most sinful of people, even those who have committed the most horrible acts, are not necessarily lost. They might

not be annihilated, and they might not be condemned to eternal punishment.

They might still find their way to Heaven. Interestingly, this theory aligns to some degree with the Catholic notion of Purgatory, something that is not explicitly described in the Bible. The more general theory of Restorationism is based on passages like the very uplifting 29th verse of Chapter 1 of the Gospel of John, where John the Baptist is announcing the arrival of Jesus:

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

If Jesus is going to take away the sins of the world, doesn't that include everyone?

Consider this from the end of the 9th chapter of Hebrews, a letter whose author is unknown. But Hebrews is considered to be representative of true first century Christian teaching:

²⁷ And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, ²⁸ so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Many feel that this says that at the End Times all those who have died in the past and all those who are still living will be judged, and that folks who are "eager" have an opportunity to be saved. It does not say they must be "righteous".

In Chapter 12 of the Gospel of John, Jesus makes the following statement to two of the Apostles, Andrew and Philip:

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

There is a particularly strong statement in the 5th chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans. This is from a passage where he is saying that sin came into the world via Adam, but it leaves the world via Jesus:

¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.

This says, “all men,” not just the righteous. Theologians and Christian writers in the second through fourth century widely believed in the theory of Restorationism, that all people would have an opportunity after death to find their way back to God. These included very famous people like Eusebius, Ambrose, and Origen. But Augustine, who lived in the late fourth century and early fifth century, and was an extremely influential bishop, in one of the most impactful books ever written in the Christian world, *The City of God*, rejected this view. He believed that there were people who, upon death, were forever condemned to punishment in Hell. This belief, adopted by the Catholic Church, has been passed down to us. But it is very important to note that the very early church, for the first almost four hundred years, did not believe this.

But here is the bottom line. The Bible is ambiguous on Hell. Jesus never makes a clear statement about the nature of Hell and whether some people are

forever condemned to suffer punishment or are forever annihilated, or if all people can be saved. The various other documents in the Bible, like the letters of Paul and Revelation, are equally unclear. A key problem is that it is hard to know if many biblical statements are philosophical or metaphorical – and not literal.

To get back to my father's father, when he returned to Quebec after serving in the trenches for two years, he was apparently very mentally ill. He might have stayed away from his son and his wife because he thought he would do more harm than good by being with them. My father spent his entire youth and adult life, up until that letter from the police chief of Val d'Or came, angry at his father for running off. But here is what struck him about that letter. I remember reading it myself. It said that Earnest L'Heureux, my father's father, died on the street. He had almost no possessions. But one of the few things they found on him was an address book. In it were the addresses of everywhere that my father had ever lived, including his current address in Oxnard, California. He probably got these addresses from other relatives with whom he was in contact. My father took this to mean, and I believe correctly, that his father loved him, that he thought about his son, that he did not dismiss his son from his mind. Perhaps he meant to someday contact my father. Perhaps he sought restoration but never got to the point where he felt he was ready to contact his son.

There is a theory that the Bible is very deliberately ambiguous about the nature of Hell. In chapter 2 of Ephesians, one of Paul's letters, we are told this:

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

God didn't create us so that we could sit around and worry about the nature of Hell, about whether we are annihilated, suffer punishment forever, or can be restored no matter what we have done on Earth. God created us to live on this planet fully, to do good works, to serve God by serving other people. We're to make the most of this life. That's the best path to not having to worry about Hell. If the Bible authors had been preoccupied with the worst that could happen after we die, then perhaps we would have missed the incredible message of a Christian life. In truth, the Bible is filled with allegories, metaphors, very abstract language, and in general, words that are open to a wide variety of interpretations. We are often taught a single, orthodox, historically Catholic way of reading the Bible, and this detracts from its intended mystery. The Bible allows us a lot of personal leeway in understanding the Word of God. This is a good thing. We should be happy that it is very unclear just what Hell is, how we get there, what happens when we arrive, and if there is any way out of it once we are dead. We should live for a life with God, not for worries about what happens after death.