

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Good News About Hell; Even Better News About Heaven

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Scripture:

2 Thessalonians 1:6-10

⁶ God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ⁷ and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. ⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might ¹⁰ on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

Revelation 21:1-4

¹ Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Transcript:

Today is the last sermon in our series on the basic beliefs of being a Christian. And there's a lot of things we could have talked about in this series, but we just stuck with the most basic beliefs. And today we're going to talk about hell. That's right. All right, let's give it up for hell. You guys came on hell Sunday. Isn't that awesome? Some of you maybe brought a friend day and you're thinking, this is going to be hell. It is. But I'm also going to talk about heaven too, and that's a little bit better. So the Bible says that one day Jesus will return to make all things new. And some people will live with him forever on a renewed earth forever, and bodies will never die. And that place is called heaven. And others will be separated from God, and that place is called hell.

And I know that this topic raises tons of questions. What about this and what about that? And this person and my great-uncle Fred and all of that stuff, and I can't answer all those questions in one sermon, but I really encourage you to ask a pastor or a friend of yours, this is a little bit more of a general overview. And the topic of hell is difficult because it's been misused by a lot of Christians in the past to kind of scare people into converting, turn or burn kinds of sermons. So now, we preachers kind of shy away from preaching about hell. We don't talk about Bruno.

Some of you get that and others of you don't. But we can't fully understand God's love, the depth of God's love unless we understand hell, and I'm going to tell you why in a minute. I'm going to give you the good news about hell. And I'm going to give you the even better news about heaven and how they both change how we live right here right now. Not just in eternity, but here on earth too, because they're kind, it's kind of both. And rightly understood, heaven and hell help us experience God's love more deeply, give us a bigger life as part of his rescue mission and gives us courage and hope when we face the challenges in life. So first good thing about hell is that it shows that God loves us enough to give us freedom.

People will often say, how can a loving God send people to hell? He doesn't. We send ourselves there because we prefer to live without God. See, we tend to think of hell as pitchforks and fires and torture chambers. That's actually medieval art. Or we'll say things like, you know, man, that fight was hell or wow, that meeting was hell or I went to Disney's Princesses on Ice and it was hell. That one, by the way is true. That's in the Bible. It's good theology.

But the Bible uses lots and lots of different images for hell, kind of lake of fire, outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, probably symbolic language, especially since they contradict each other like, lake a fire and outer darkness. But what the Bible is clear about is hell is a place where God is not. The Bible says, God is just, remember that phrase. He will pay back trouble

to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be shut out from the presence of the Lord. Hell is being shut out from God's presence.

I think the best depiction of this is in C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, which is a kind of a parable about hell, where nobody can stand other people because everybody's so obnoxious. So they move further and further apart. Napoleon lives on the edge of the galaxy so he doesn't have to deal with other people. And every day a bus goes from hell to heaven and people can stay in heaven if they want to, but very few do because the grass hurts their feet, because it's so real. And they're just shades of people and they don't want to give up their sinful behavior. So most people choose to go back to hell. In other words, hell is getting everything that you want. Years ago after my first year in ministry as a college pastor, my wife and I were just exhausted. And this was before kids.

So we decided to go to Europe and just spoil ourselves. Just indulge ourselves. I mean, there's nothing wrong with some rest, but our attitude was like just, let's just indulge ourselves. And so every day I'd ask what will make Scott happy today? What would Scott like to eat today? What would Scott like to do today? Let's think about Scott, shall we? Let's think about Scott again. We just don't think about Scott enough. But as the vacation went on, we did not get happier, we got grumpier. And we get mad if we didn't get exactly what we wanted when we wanted it, up to the point that on the way home on the airplane ride home, there was a woman sitting between my wife and me and this woman just took too much of our personal space.

Her feet kept going over to my side of the leg room. She took the armrest, which I think should be a fineable offense, because I view that as neutral territory. So we spent the whole flight passively-aggressively fighting for our personal space, nudging her arm to get the arm rest back.

We did this across the entire western hemisphere. And when we got off the plane, my wife looked at me and said, what was that about? And I realized that after two weeks of living only for myself, my world had shrunk down to the size of an airplane seat. Coach, mind you, not even first class. That's what having everything you ever want does to you. It makes you miserable. Which means hell isn't just what happens after we die. Yes, it's that too. But it's what happens here on earth when we ignore God and just prefer our way, our things, our sins, our pride, our stuff to God's way. That's hell.

And because God loves us, he gives us the freedom to choose to reject him. Otherwise, we'd just be robots. We wouldn't be human, just robots he programmed. So God gave us the freedom to choose life without him, and the doctrine of hell says we retain that freedom into

eternity. Hell is the greatest compliment God ever paid to human freedom. Sin is saying to God, I want nothing to do with you. Hell is when God says after a long time, finally your wish is granted.

Second good thing about hell is it means God will put a stop to evil one. The passage I just quoted said, God is just. And he wants to create not just a marginally better world, he wants to create a perfect world called heaven where there's no crime or racism or poverty or oppression, no dictators invading other countries, a perfect world without any pain. And anyone who wants to be part of that world can be if, if they truly repent of their sins and say, Jesus, I need your death on a cross to forgive my sins. And I need you to start making me like you starting in this life and finishing up the job in heaven.

But some folks can't admit that and he's not going to let them into his perfect heaven because if he did, they'll just mess it up. Do you want a wimpy God who just allows oppressors to keep oppressing and thieves to keep thieving? That is not a loving God because sin hurts the people he loves. Even a little sin like gossip, as I said a couple weeks ago, if people are gossiping about you in heaven, it's not heaven. God is just, so he will quarantine unrepentant evil in hell so that heaven can remain perfect.

It's interesting to me that two of the main objections to the existence of God contradict each other. How can a loving God allow so much evil? How can a loving God judge evil people? You kind of got to pick because they cancel each other out. God is loving, which is why he is just, because sin hurts the people he loves. Hell shows, God respects our freedom and will put an end to evil. But do you know what the best thing about hell is? The best thing about hell is you don't have to go there. God doesn't want anyone in hell so much so that he came himself in the person of Jesus to die on a cross, to pay the price for our sins so that justice is served, but mercy wins. And if we are truly repentant of our sins and accept his sacrifice on our behalf, we are saved. The Bible says, God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. The goal is not to keep people out of heaven, it's to bring people in.

Now, I know that all of this sort of raises the question. Well, what about people who never heard about Jesus? Or what about people who lived a good life, but they just aren't Christian. Are they going to heaven or are they going to hell? And I actually answered that question a couple months ago in a sermon, but just briefly to kind of review what I said. I know three things. God is loving. God doesn't want anyone to be lost. Jesus is the only way to salvation. Somehow those three things go together. We know, for instance, that in the Old Testament people like Abraham they're saved, even though they live centuries before Jesus. Never heard of him. The Bible says Abraham believed God and was credited to him as righteousness. But

Abraham didn't believe just any old thing about any old God, it was very specific. When it comes to getting right with God, Abraham says, God himself will provide the sacrifice.

In other words, Abraham has a sense that he can't save himself. God is going to have to do it for him, which God does 2000 years later in the person of Jesus. Abraham believed in the function of Jesus and his need for Jesus though he did not know his name, believed in the function and the need for Jesus though he didn't know his name. So on judgment day, when Abraham sees Jesus, he will say, you are the one I was following all along though I did not know your name. And wherever folks have a sense that they are sinful and that they can't fix that on their own, they need God to save them and respond to that truth, they are saved.

Christianity doesn't save anybody, only Jesus does, whether people know his name or not. And good people do not go to heaven because there are no perfectly good people. The only people in heaven are bad people who know that they're bad and can repent of their badness and admit that they need Jesus. And by whatever route they come, whether they know his name or not, by whatever route we come, the door we walk through is always Jesus. Christianity is not particular about who gets saved, just who does the saving is Jesus, which is why Jesus is the most inclusive way to God there is. You don't have to be born into the right caste, you don't have to do a lot of rituals. You don't even have to be good. You just need to know your need for Jesus.

And when it comes to heaven and hell, none of us know who's going to heaven. None of us do. We don't know, for instance, what happens in the last moments of a person's life. We don't understand how all of that works. All I know is two things. Jesus does the saving, number one. And number two, he ain't asking my opinion. It's not going to be on judgment day, Jesus is not going to look over at me and go, Hey Dudley, what do you think about Jake here? In, out? What are we doing here? Jake has to start sitting front row. Cause I keep picking on him. That conversation is not going to happen. That is above my pay grade, which is really good news for Jake, and for all of us, that's above my pay grade, and I'm a pastor. Think how much above your pay grade it is.

The good news about hell is you don't have to go there because of Jesus, which brings me to heaven. And over the years, I've preached a lot more about heaven than hell. So I'm going to be brief here about heaven. But first, heaven is not some ethereal place where angels float around on clouds, playing harps all day, the eternal dentist waiting room with the bad music. That's not what it is. Heaven is this earth renewed. In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John gets a vision of heaven and he says, then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, the holy city coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband,

coming down out of heaven. We do not go to heaven. Heaven comes to us. It is this earth completely renewed.

In Revelation, Jesus says, I am making all things new, not all new things. All things made new. Heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world. It is a real physical, perfect place and we will be physical people too, not disembodied souls floating around. We will be raised in a body that will never die just as Jesus was.

Second. It's a place of activity and adventure. It's described as a city. Cities have lots of stuff going on, lots to do. Now, I'm sure there's mountains and oceans and stuff, but the point is, heaven is a place of activity and adventure, not of boredom.

And then third, heaven is about perfect relationships. It's described as a bride. Jesus compared heaven to a wedding, so those are relationship images. Heaven is a place where we are in perfect relationship with God and with each other. So that's the theology. That's the theology of heaven and hell. That's the what, so what. What difference does this make for us right now? Because heaven and hell are real eternal places, but they also so shape how we live here and now. It's both. So we've all heard the phrase hell on earth, which is when things happen contrary to God's will. Wherever there's fear or wrecked relationships, war, as we're seeing this week, families falling apart, going through the motions of life without any joy. All of that is hell on earth. And we all experience a little hell on earth.

Some of you today might have walked into church thinking what the, because you're going through some hell on earth. But we've also heard the phrase, heaven on earth. And that's the point. Jesus taught us to pray. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. He meant it literally. Now, heaven won't fully happen until Jesus returns, but we can get glimpses of heaven breaking into our world. Jesus says, the kingdom of God is in your midst. In other words, it's here. Now, it's not going to be fully here until Jesus returns, but we get glimpses of it here and now. When we experience closeness with God, when we have relationships that are whole, when injustice is overcome, that's heaven breaking into our world and we can start living the heavenly kind of life now for a couple of reasons.

First, if you get heaven right, you're going to get earth right. First reason, if you really understand heaven, it makes you brave. You've heard me talk a lot about how one of the reasons Christianity grew so quickly during the Roman Empire was because when plagues came and everyone left the cities, Christians rushed in to care for plague victims. Some of those plagues lasted 15 years. Can you imagine? We've been in one for two. Can you imagine 15 years? And in one plague, 30% of the Roman population was wiped out. That's huge. Families would abandon a sick child or a sick parent, but Christians rushed in to care for plague victims,

many died themselves. Why? They believed in heaven. Non-Christians had only this life, so they had to guard at all costs, but Christians knew that death does nothing more than translate us to a better world so they could give their life away. But they also knew that this world mattered, Jesus came from heaven to this world and told us to bring up there down here. So they also knew that this world mattered. So those early Christians cared for plague victims to bring up there down here. See, if you really get heaven, it makes you a really good citizen of earth.

Second way, heaven affects how we live, is that it makes us world-changers. When we see Russia invade Ukraine or racism in our own country, or poverty, those things are hell on earth. And we are called to make it on earth as it is in heaven. You heard earlier in the service about what we're doing as a church in Congo, where there's so much ethnic violence, bringing food, but also reconciliation work to end that ethnic violence and make Congo just a little bit more like heaven here on earth. That's getting heaven right. And I guarantee you, there are Christians right now working really hard to do the same thing in Ukraine. In your school, when you come alongside someone who's being bullied or in your retirement community, when you reach out to lonely people or you see unfair practices at work and you correct them, that's bringing up there down here.

Which brings me to the last way that heaven changes how we live here on earth. It means that our lives are redeemable. The Bible says that the heavenly city has 12 gates and on the gates were written the names of the 12 tribes of Israel. The wall of the city had 12 foundations and on them were the names of the 12 apostles of the lamb. That's just a lot of twelves, which means that heaven is Sea Hawk territory, I guess.

The 12 tribes of Israel, 12 apostles, those are the foundations of heaven? Are you kidding me? Think about the Old Testament and those stories about the 12 tribes, rape, murder, incest. Oh my goodness. And then the 12 apostles. I mean, incredibly incompetent, incompetent times 10 incompetent. They're just constantly screwing up, constantly. That's the foundation of heaven? Our flawed ancestors, our sinful 12 tribes? What that tells me is that God takes all the rotten stuff of earth and he re-fashions it and makes it the foundation of heaven. I heard a pastor talk about how his young son died of a rare birth defect and he was furious at God. I would be too. And he said, God, here I am trying to do your ministry, that's hard enough, and this is the thanks I get? My son dies. And he said, he got back at God the only way he knew how. He just stopped talking to God completely.

But his anger was driving a wedge between him and his wife and a wedge between him and his church. Now, the anger was understandable, but it went on and on and on for well over a year and it was destroying the good things he had in his life. That's hell on earth. Finally, after over a year of this, a good friend kind of gently nudged him and said, how long do you need to

stay mad at God to punish him for what happened? Don't you see that your anger is destroying your family and you and your ministry? The pastor said that night he spent the entire night yelling at God at the top of his voice until he was just finally completely exhausted. And then he said, I'm sorry, God, please forgive me.

And he said, then he felt God's presence and a supernatural peace he'd never experienced before. And he said, I remember that God lost his son too on the cross, but that Jesus was raised from the dead as will my son be, as will I be and we will live together in heaven forever. And he said, that night, God began to heal my heart. Now, he still gets angry sometimes, especially when he sees a child the age his son would've been, but he has a much deeper connection to God than he did before. And now he and his wife are sharing their grief in a way that is bringing them together rather than driving them apart. And it is making him a much better pastor because now he has this deep empathy for people in pain. And he says it is so rewarding to be able to share my pain and see God use it to set other people free from their pain. And I can do it in a way others can't because I've been through so much pain and God is using it for good. That's called redemptive suffering.

When God uses your pain for good, takes the hell in your life and fashions heaven out of it. The pastor says, I now know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is for me, even when things are hard. And we eventually, we're all going to die, all of us eventually, and actually I've come to see that as good news because none of us wants to live on this earth as it is forever. But if we know Jesus, we will live forever on this earth, fully renewed, fully restored, fully refashioned. God took the hell in his life and is bringing glimpses of heaven out of it. He's making all things new.

So what hell is there in your life right now? And what hell do you see around you where you live, work, play, or learn or in our world? And how can you partner with Jesus to bring up there down here? Because that's what Jesus does, he grabs onto the pit of hell itself and squeezes heaven out of it. God says there is no place in your life where you are too far or too far away from my grace or from my mercy to find you. No matter how hard, how low, how sad, how lost, how far you feel, God is able to come into what you can't get out of.

Jesus reaches into the hell of your fears or finances, or wrecked relationships, or boredom to give you a bigger life in his rescue mission. Jesus will brave the fires of whatever hell he has to, go down to whatever depths he has to rescue you and to rescue this world, including stretching his arms out wide on a cross. Whatever sins you have sinned, whatever disasters you've encountered, Jesus will restore your hope, renew your past, redeem your future, repay you for the losses, rebuke the hell that is in your life and refashion heaven out of it so that you'll rejoice

as he makes all things new in you. And then through you, renews this world, that's what our God does. He makes all things new. That is good news.

So Jesus, thank you that that's what you do. You came from up there down here, you bring up there down here. That's what you do. And we know that you can do it. Yes, you can. And yes, you will because you've promised it. Help us to see you doing that all week long in our lives and where we live, work play, or learn and we'll give you the glory. I pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Icebreaker Question:

- What is something you are thankful for today?

Opening Question:

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions – Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g. traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions - Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- The sermon talked about heaven and hell being both eternal places, but also things we experience here on earth as well.
 - Where have you experienced heaven breaking into earth?
 - Where are you praying for heaven to break into earth?
 - Where are you feeling God's nudge to participate in Kingdom work?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer:

- Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.
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