



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Questioning Hell by Mike Poteet



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The movie *Come Sunday* depicts a pastor's rejection of the doctrine of hell. What does the Bible say about hell? How does the doctrine of hell shape our relationships with God and with other people? How important is belief in hell as a part of our Christian faith?

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Come Sunday

The recent Netflix original movie *Come Sunday* is based on the real-life experiences of Carlton Pearson (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor), pastor of a large Pentecostal church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In the film, Pearson responds to what he believes is a revelation from God by rejecting the doctrine of hell. At its core, the film is a character-driven drama that follows Pearson through the aftermath of his controversial declaration.

Come Sunday isn't necessarily a movie *about* theology, but it touches on a number of theological topics and naturally raises theological questions. In one scene, Pearson tells his congregation, "If we're really saying that God sends billions of people to burn in hell for eternity for missing the mark or missing the point, . . . that's not the God that we worship. . . . God loves us all!" Yet according to Pew Research, most religiously affiliated US adults (58 percent) believe hell is a place "where people who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally punished." That percentage climbs to 70 percent among Christians.

REFLECT:

- What do we mean when we talk about hell? How important are our beliefs about hell for our Christian faith?
- If your pastor preached against the reality of hell, how would you respond?
- Do you think hell is real? Why or why not?

- In what ways have your thoughts about hell changed over time, if at all?

Hell and Scripture

The Old Testament generally doesn't talk about the afterlife. Instead, there are references to Sheol, the underworld realm of the dead that houses both good and evil alike. Sheol, often translated as "the pit" or "the grave," is dark and deathly quiet. The thought of it is said to terrify the living. In **Psalm 88:5**, the inhabitants are said to be "cut off from [God's] power." However, in **Psalm 139:8**, the writer holds out hope that could be present even in the darkest depths.

In the Old Testament's clearest reference to resurrection, Daniel foresaw many of the dead being raised, "some to eternal life, others to shame and eternal disgrace" (**Daniel 12:2**). Centuries later, John had a vision of God judging all the dead, and "anyone whose name wasn't found written in the scroll of life was thrown into the fiery lake" (**Revelation 20:12, 15**).

John's "fiery lake" echoes Jesus' descriptions of Gehenna, the word often translated as "hell" in the New Testament. At the time of Jesus, Gehenna was an actual place outside of Jerusalem. Also known as the Valley of Hinnom, it had been the site of child sacrifices in the past. As scholar Mary Ann Tolbert writes in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, it became associated with "death and eternal punishment for the unrighteous." Jesus draws on this tradition when speaking about hell's unending fire (**Matthew 25:41; Mark 9:43-48**). "Because no other biblical figure speaks more often of hell than Jesus," states the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, "it is no surprise that he speaks most forcefully about the need to avoid hell."

REFLECT:

- How should we respond to the multiple views of the afterlife contained in the Bible?

- Is it surprising to you that Jesus is the biblical figure who speaks the most about hell? How should this affect the way we think about hell?
- What other information have you heard in the past about either Sheol or Gehenna?

Hell and God

To consider the idea of hell in the abstract is an interesting academic exercise, but it's only in the context of our relationship with God that this idea has any power. With that in mind, let's consider what the doctrine of hell tells about who God is.

- **God is just.** The writer of **Ecclesiastes** says that "the righteous get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked get what the righteous deserve" (**8:14**). Each of us can relate to this on some level based on our personal observations and experiences. The doctrine of hell proclaims that God is just and that evildoers will be judged and punished for their crimes—if not in this life, then in the next.

- **God gives us freedom to choose to love.** The doctrine of hell takes human moral responsibility seriously. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor or against ourselves: 'He who does not love remains in death'" (see **1 John 3:14**, Amplified Bible). When viewed in this light, God condemns no one to hell. Those in hell condemn themselves.

- **God calls us to proclaim the good news.** The church has always called people to repent, believe in Christ, and be saved (**Acts 2:38-40; 4:12**). Concern that some people will be eternally separated from God because they haven't heard the gospel and had a chance to respond in repentance and faith has motivated and still motivates many missionaries and evangelists. Theologian D. A. Carson writes, "The sheer desperate lostness of human beings" must impel Christians to evangelize.

REFLECT:

- What do you think about the idea that the doctrine of hell guarantee's God's justice? Is this sufficient?
- Why are human beings allowed the freedom to reject God?
- Is fear a valid motivation to believe in God? Is it a useful form of evangelism?

Questions About Hell

In addition to the ways the doctrine of hell can reinforce these positive ideas about God, it also raises serious questions.

- **Is hell a just punishment for sin?** Eternal suffering may seem an unjust penalty for sin committed in a comparatively brief human life, especially if that suffering isn't divine discipline leading to repentance. How does unending retribution square with scriptural insights into God's mercy, including Jesus' own prayer that God forgive his executioners (**Luke 23:34**)?
- **Can our choice to love contribute to salvation?** In *Come Sunday*, Pearson's mentor Oral Roberts (played by Martin Sheen) urges him to preach

on **Romans 10:9** and teach that only people who accept Christ are saved. Does this understanding turn confession of faith into a "work" we must do to "get saved"? If hell is the refusal to love, do genuinely loving people who never confess faith really belong there?

- **How good is the good news?** Paul teaches that all have sinned, then declares, "All are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus" (**Romans 3:23-24**). Scriptures such as **1 Corinthians 15:22** and **1 John 2:1-2** suggest that Christ's salvation is far-reaching and already accomplished. When we spread the good news in an attempt to save souls from hell, do we underestimate the extent of Jesus' work on the cross?

Any doctrine worth believing is also worth questioning. Questions asked in the faithful search for understanding don't threaten God. No matter where we come down, we ultimately put our trust in God, who doesn't want "anyone to perish but all to change their hearts and lives" (**2 Peter 3:9**).

REFLECT:

- What motivates you to share the gospel?
- What questions do you still have about hell?

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Core Bible Passages

The depiction of God’s future judgment in **2 Thessalonians 1:3-10** contains elements often associated with hell. The author—whether Paul or, as many scholars think, a later Christian leader writing under Paul’s name—anticipates God “[paying] back” his readers’ opponents (**verse 6**) with “blazing fire” (**verse 8**) and “eternal destruction” (**verse 9**) because they rejected the gospel. Considering Paul’s objections in other epistles to those who preached a doctrine that differed from his, it’s possible he expects Christ to punish those on the other side of some theological debate.

More than anyone else in Scripture, Jesus talks about hell. His instructions in **Mark 9:43-48** are obviously exaggerated—he isn’t literally commanding self-mutilation and amputation—in order to emphasize the dire consequences of hell. This passage can be compared with **Luke 12:4-5**, where Jesus tells people to be afraid of the one who “has the authority to throw [them] into hell.”

For Jesus, doctrinal disputes don’t lead to hell. Instead, hell is for those who fail to care for the poor, the suffering, and the vulnerable, like the rich man in one of Jesus’ parables who failed to care for Lazarus (**Luke 16:19-31**) and the goats on the king’s left hand in **Matthew 25:41-46**. In Jesus’ teaching, those who go to hell for rejecting him aren’t necessarily those who fail to explicitly confess him as lord (**Matthew 7:21-23**) but rather those who reject him by rejecting their neighbors who are in need.

REFLECT:

- How do you react to images of divine judgment like that in 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10? Why?
- What are the practical implications of Jesus’ teaching that our actions in this life toward those who are poor, suffering, and vulnerable have eternal significance?

Helpful Links

- *Come Sunday* official trailer — https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVQFWvm_fbU
- Brief video biography of and interview with Carlton Pearson from *Megyn Kelly Today* — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUaNhxq0JcE>
- United Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton’s article on “The Logic of Hell” — <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/1005/the-logic-of-hell> (see also a video summarizing his argument at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDmspkibuAA>)
- “The Campaign to Eliminate Hell,” a *National Geographic* article — <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/05/160513-theology-hell-history-christianity/>

United Methodist Perspective

In 2014, Pew Research found that 64 percent of United Methodists believe in hell. Historically, this 64 percent of respondents are in line with the founder of Methodism, John Wesley. As Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves writes for *Good News* magazine, “John Wesley had no problem talking about the horrors of eternal punishment with his 18th-century audiences. And our current *Book of Discipline* affirms that ‘we believe in the resurrections of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation.’”

The Reverend Adam Hamilton sees the logic in the idea of hell, while also rejecting overly literal interpretations. In an article on MinistryMatters.com, Hamilton writes that hell “is the place for all of those who do not wish to live according to God’s will and submit their lives to God’s reign. God . . . is a good King, a benevolent King, and a loving King. But he will not force persons to be his subjects. . . . [Hell is] a kind of dark kingdom, reserved for all who wish to do things their own way.”

The Reverend Dr. Diana Hynson of Discipleship Ministries writes that while official United Methodist “statements of doctrine state that salvation is AVAILABLE to all persons, they stop short of saying that salvation is GUARANTEED to all persons.” Hynson continues, “God’s grace is necessary for salvation and . . . humankind cannot in any way attain salvation without God. . . . There is certainly an element of awareness and cooperation on our part to order our lives after the image of Christ if we have the capacity to do so.”

REFLECT:

- How do you react to Adam Hamilton’s interpretation of hell?
- Do you think your church talks about hell too much? too little? Explain.

Next Week in  FaithLink
Connecting Faith and Life

On-Demand Culture

by Jeanne Torrence Finley

In the past decade, we’ve seen an explosion in what might be called “on-demand” culture. What do we mean by the phrase *on-demand*? How has this culture changed us? How do we respond to these changes as people of faith?

Opening Prayer

Holy, just, and merciful God, we praise you for the gift of salvation you have given us in your Son Jesus, even as we tremble before the mystery of how your grace and your judgment work themselves out in our lives. May your Spirit strengthen us to listen to the Scriptures and learn from them. Also, help us to listen to one another in this time together, that we may grow in faith as witnesses to Jesus Christ, to whom you have given the ability to overcome death and hell. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Have several Bibles on hand along with a marker-board and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to treat one another with respect as they explore this topic together. Emphasize that adult Christian education should be a safe space in which to ask questions and think in new ways about faith.
- Read or review the highlights of each section of this issue, using the *REFLECT* questions to spark discussion.
- Tell participants that the essay shouldn't be viewed as an exhaustive discussion of what Scripture says about hell, nor does it cover all of the arguments for or questions about the doctrine of hell. Encourage participants to extend the essay's discussions by using a biblical concordance to look up and share other relevant passages.

- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

- Before reading or reviewing the main essay, watch the trailer for *Come Sunday* and/or the excerpt from *Megyn Kelly Today* listed in "Helpful Links." Ask participants to react to Carlton Pearson's message about hell.
- If you have Internet access, search online for Christian artwork throughout history picturing hell. What details do these images include that go beyond Scripture? What messages are these images attempting to convey? If you were going to illustrate your ideas about hell, how would you do so?

Closing Prayer

Your ways are not our ways, O God, but we trust your ways are just and good, because you have revealed your justice and goodness most clearly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Send us forth to bear witness to him with confidence and courage, not knowing all but knowing enough because, through him, we know you. Amen.