

Will only a few get saved?

Last week Chris chose the shortest of parables – the mustard seed. I found one that requires very little work – one that Jesus explains himself!!!

The man who sowed good seed has an enemy who deliberately sewed weeds among his wheat crop. The motivation appears to be to ruin the crop. My research has revealed that the weed was likely to be *zizania* which looks very similar to wheat as it develops.

In the past the parable of the wheat and the weeds has been taught as one that applies to the church; the teaching being that church leaders mustn't be judgemental in rooting out perceived evil in their congregation.

To apply the parable that way misses completely the explanation given by Jesus – the field is the world, not the church. Both righteous and evil live side by side and we wait patiently for God to intervene.

It does teach us that we should refrain from doing God's judging work for him. God is patient and God will decide. It is not for us to decide who is in and who is out and that is relevant whether it's church or community or the wider world. Heaven is not ours to populate.

This parable, like my last one and plenty more have a serious warning and ending. When Jesus tells today's parable, the weeds are bundled together for burning.

In the explanation we discover that the angels "weed out" of the kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil and they're thrown into the furnace where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Over the centuries the church has had a binary view of heaven and hell. I can only assume it kept things simple and served its purpose. But there's an aspect that is troubling. It means we present the good news of the gospel with an "or else" tacked on the end.

God loves you very much.

Jesus died so that you could be forgiven.

Those who repent and believe in Jesus AND do the will of the Father are heading through the narrow gate and the narrow way to glory.

But if you don't repent, believe and reform. Well then!

What waits is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In a fire.

For eternity.

How can love flourish when there is such an "or else!" as part of the package?

Jesus offers the warning plenty of times. The risk of not being prepared and therefore being shut out. Those who are self-serving and claim an allegiance to Jesus – shut out. *Away from me I never knew you.* Those who deliberately thwart the King's plans. Thrown out. So it goes on.

That there is a judgement and that it's a serious matter we shouldn't doubt, but it still leaves us with questions. What does happen to all those who miss the narrow gate?

I recently had a conversation with someone who is quite comfortable with the traditional view of hell being the destination of everyone other than those of a clear faith. It came perilously close to judging again. We think we know who is in and who is out!

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The traditional view is either eternal bliss in heaven, or eternal torment in hell. The only problem with that view? It's not what Jesus said.

In his exploration of this topic, Roger Harper takes the whole of the first chapter of his book "The Lie of Hell" to explain that if you are going to challenge the traditional view of eternal hell, you must focus on the words of Jesus. God said "This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him"

We listen to what Jesus says, we examine all scripture to build on what Jesus says, then explore more widely. The key is what Jesus said.

Roger Harper believes that the words of Jesus can be straightforwardly understood, our only difficulty being that Jesus spoke Aramaic. His words are recorded in Greek. The Greek was translated to Latin and then translated to English. In that process something occurred that has been most unhelpful.

Sometimes Jesus speaks of Gehenna – the place of fire waiting for the devil and his angels. At other times Jesus speaks of Hades, a miserable place of darkness where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Two different words. Two different places. Both different words were translated "hell".

Gehenna is a place of destruction. Complete annihilation. Nothing left. Not an eternity of suffering but a place where existence ends.

The other (Hades) is an ongoing place of existence where souls know they are not where they would rather be. There are parable stories that highlight this realm. For the rich man (Luke 16) it is a place of suffering and torment while Lazarus the beggar is now in glory. The exact nature of Hades is difficult to be categorical about. The descriptions we have could well be metaphor, but the two realms are separate and different.

Hades – a place of darkness and existence.  
Gehenna – the place of utter destruction.

Jesus is consistent in how he describes one place or the other. The idea that at death we are judged and the decision is made – eternal bliss or eternal suffering - doesn't square with scripture or indeed our Anglican Theology. The conflation of the two different places isn't right.

When we say the Nicene Creed we say the words "he will come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end". Why would there need to be a judgement if the destination is already fixed?

It would appear from studying Jesus words and scripture as a whole, Hades is some form of remand prison where souls await a final judgement. That judgement is on their lives and deeds and that judgement is exclusively Jesus prerogative.

St.Peter speaks about this realm and Jesus preaching to the spirits kept in captivity.

For some evangelicals this is a struggle. It gives the idea that there is a second chance after death, which lessens the impetus for seeking Christ in this life. It's not a second chance over which you have any choice. It's the judgement of Christ on how you have lived.

Let's return to Jesus words for a moment. He doesn't speak as a threat (*follow me or your numbers up*). He exhorts and warns and seeks to persuade all who have ears to hear that there is a way to avoid Hades and Gehenna.

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Why have I taken two weeks to explore this topic? In the first place – it's rarely spoken about and so it's an area of theology where we are weak.

And secondly many of us have been given a simplistic in or out choice – in and it's eternal bliss and out and it's eternal fire. And that just isn't biblical.

Thirdly it gives us confidence to share our faith and the love and grace we know in Jesus Christ without a threat of hell, but with a loving grace to avoid remand prison!

Fourthly we can absolutely and completely put our trust in God's grace for those we worry about who we think have missed out. He decides, he judges and we know He is a God of mercy and grace.

Finally it reminds us that we should have no fear in digging deep into scripture and discussing it, exploring it, challenging it and each other to gain an insight of truth. So afterwards, by all means – come and share with me if you disagree, agree or want to ask more.

Roger Harpers conclusion in a very readable book is that eventually Gehenna itself will be consumed. When it has achieved the purpose for which it was created and evil has been destroyed, death itself will die. This shouldn't be a surprise to us – we sing it often enough.

When I tread the verge of Jordan  
Bid my fears anxious subside  
Death of death  
And hell's destruction  
Land me safe on Canaan's side  
Songs of praises  
I will ever give to thee

We live in a world where evil is all around us. It troubles our souls and causes great grief. But it won't always be so and it won't ultimately triumph. While we have the time, let us confidently proclaim the goodness of God in Jesus Christ working for that day when his kingdom comes and justice and mercy will be seen in all the earth.

Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 24/7/2022