

Hell and the gospel

Part 2 – To those who cry for justice

To those who realize and accept they deserve God's anger (part 1), and that God has every right to condemn them to an ever-burning hell (assuming such a place exists), there is good news in the gospel.

The good news is “[grace in all its truth](#),” **Colossians 1:6**, perfectly illustrated in the life of Paul, because if anyone deserved a one-way ticket to hell, he did. Paul was the “[worst of sinners](#),” **1 Timothy 1: 16**, “[a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man](#),” **verse 13**. Given the opportunity, he would have shot down Christianity just as it was finding its wings.

And what made that the worst of sins was that Paul - and especially Paul - should have known better. He was a highly respected teacher of the Scriptures, but in his towering arrogance and heartless self-centredness, he'd become a delusional tyrant and a cold-blooded predator of innocent men, women and children in direct and brazen opposition to Jesus Christ. He was being very stupid, very stubborn and very cruel. He'd become all the things you'd want to send a person to hell for.

But instead of being sent off to hell, Paul “[was shown mercy](#),” **verse 13**. Why? Because, **verse 15**, “[Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners](#).” Christ came to get people **out** of hell, not put them in it. And to those who fear hell for what they've done, this is good news. Christ's mercy extends even to the worst of sinners.

But **to those who cry out for JUSTICE**, this isn't good news at all. Surely there are people who should NEVER be shown mercy, like serial killers of young women, priests who rape children, genital mutilators, abusers of the elderly and handicapped, bullies who drive their victims to suicide, genocidal maniacs like Hitler, recruiters of child soldiers, employers who skimp on safety, or anyone who tortures animals. Watch the News on any day of the week and there are tons of people out there that, if you were God, the last thing you'd want to show them is mercy. “I hope they rot in hell and never stop screaming for what they've done” is what they deserve instead, right?

Hell seems like a very suitable place for such people, and justice surely demands it. Shouldn't people be made to pay for what they've done, and pay where it hurts, too? Give them a taste of their own medicine, and make them suffer as much as they made other people suffer. And why not keep them howling in pain in hell? For victims of horrible crimes, surely that's the only way justice can be truly satisfied.

Well, there's good news in the gospel on that front too, because God is not against putting people in hell. Hell was his idea in the first place, and most of the terrifying images we have of hell come straight out of the Bible. And some of the things that Jesus wished on people were just plain awful. He was all for slicing some people into little pieces, for instance, in Matthew 24:51. So much for "Sweet Jesus."

It was Jesus who came up with the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man too. He talks about the rich man being "In hell," **Luke 16:23**, "where he was IN TORMENT." And the rich man is crying out for water because, **verse 24**, "I am in agony in this FIRE." Fiery torment, the typical picture of hell, and here it was coming straight out of the mouth of Jesus. But these were the words he chose. Agony in a fiery torment called hell was neither a foreign concept to him, nor a strange one.

But for those who hate what money-hungry exploiters of the poor have done to people, Jesus couldn't have said it better. Because here, at last, is someone saying like it is, and the way it should be said to all those arrogant, greedy, uncaring slobbs out there who line their pockets and care nothing for the desperately poor: "May they rot in hell."

Well, in Jesus' story that's exactly what they're doing; they're rotting in hell. And who are they? The rich. People who "lived in luxury every day," **verse 19**, and cared nothing for the likes of Lazarus who was "covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table," **verse 20**. And Jesus wasn't afraid to expose the rich for what they were, or tell them where they'd be one day. They'd be in hell, along with all the other vicious leeches sucking the lifeblood out of the poor, like the bloated Wall Street bankers and oil tycoons of today.

Which is great news for those who cry out for justice, that agony in hell awaits all those whose love for money has made life hell for others. And the news gets even better too, because "besides all this (torment and agony)," **verse 26**, "between us and you a GREAT CHASM has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us."

The door to hell is locked and the keys have been thrown away. Those in hell can cry all they like, shed buckets of tears, say they're sorry a trillion times, beg on a bed of nails for forgiveness and repent until they turn purple and their faces get all puffy, but they had their chance, they made their choice and now they're stuck with it. This is the route they chose and the bed they made, so now they can jolly well lie in it.

And who was the story aimed at? "The Pharisees," **verse 14**, "who loved money" and "were sneering at Jesus" for saying they couldn't "serve both God and Money," **verse 13**. So Jesus told this story about what happened to price-gouging scum like themselves who used religion to make themselves rich - and justified it too (verse 15). They thought they were laughing all the way to the bank. But they wouldn't be laughing in hell.

Echoes of a terrible prophecy in the Old Testament must surely have been ringing in their ears as Jesus told the story of the Rich Man. Remember what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah? Oh, they knew all right. As teachers of the Law and the Prophets the Pharisees knew exactly what **Ezekiel 16:49** said: "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom. She and her daughters were **arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy**" - the SAME rotten attitudes the Pharisees had.

And what happened to Sodom and the surrounding cities **because** of those attitudes? **Genesis 19:24** - "Then the Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah," and **verse 25**, "he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities and also the vegetation in the land." And next morning, **verse 28**, when Abraham "looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace."

It was "hell" as we think of hell today - fire and brimstone, sulfurous fumes rising from fissures in the ground, dense smoke rising like ash from an exploding volcano, and total devastation. No vegetation, no people, just a desolate landscape.

The image of those smoking ruins would seal itself in people's imaginations from that point on too, often entering into Scripture and Prophecy to describe the hell that awaits the wicked. When God gets really angry, it's Sodom and Gomorrah he uses to stir people's imaginations as to what's in store for them. In **Deuteronomy 29**, for instance, when God is describing his burning fury at Israel breaking the Covenant (verses 25-28), he roars to them through Moses in **verse 23**, "The whole land will be a burning waste of salt and sulfur, nothing planted, nothing sprouting, no vegetation growing on it. It will be like the **destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah**, Admah and Zeboiim (sister cities), which the Lord overthrew in fierce anger."

When God gets really angry at the nation of Edom for bullying Israel it too is compared to Sodom and Gomorrah (Jeremiah 49:17-18). So is their fate, **Isaiah 34:9-10** - "Edom's streams will be turned into pitch, her dust into **burning sulfur**; her land will become blazing pitch! It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever." And when Gog threatens Israel in **Ezekiel 38:22**, God replies with, "I will pour down torrents of rain, hailstones and **burning sulfur** on him," and In **Psalms 11:6**, "On the wicked (in general) he will rain fiery coals and **burning sulfur**."

These awful images of burning sulfur, blazing pitch and smoke rising carry over into the New Testament too. In **2 Peter 2:6** the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah is still being used as "an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly." And in **Jude 7**, "They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." So does Jesus' story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, because the rich man in the story is IN that eternal fire, and to Jesus it's real. The punishment that's due the arrogant, overfed, unconcerned and those who are blind to the needy, truly is coming.

Anyone crying out for justice, then, should be well satisfied that “What is highly valued among men,” **Luke 16:15** - like power, money, exploitation of the poor, promoting oneself as the expense of others, especially while pretending to be religious - “is detestable in God’s sight,” and what is detestable in his sight will be dealt with, guaranteed, with the very worst punishment there is - eternal fire on the same hellish scale as Sodom and Gomorrah.

So if we’re angry, realize God’s a billion times angrier, and he’s going to punish evil people in hellish ways, in real torment and in real destruction of all that they acquired by war, murder, lies, cheating, flattery, bullying, embezzling and stealing. And the smoke of their ruin will rise for all to see and scoff at too.

We can rest assured, therefore, that God will eradicate all evil AND, according to Luke 16, he will inflict torment on evil people, equal to and worse than the torment they inflicted on others. God is not mocked. People reap what they sow. And worse still, in hell they’re still alive, a much worse torment than simply killing them off, because all the horrors of what they’ve done will hit them full in the face, as they did with the Rich Man. But nothing at this point in the Rich Man’s life, even in hell, would make him, or his brothers, change their attitude. It wouldn’t matter, Jesus said, “if someone rises from the dead” and goes to them, **verse 31**. They were stuck in the endless torment of their own stinking, rotten attitudes.

No wonder hell rates so high in Christianity, but unfortunately more as a tool of fear rather than assurance of justice. Christians preach good news and nothing but, and the good news is, God cries out for justice just as much as we do, AND he **carries through** with it too, as we see in the history of Israel.

In **Jeremiah 7**, for instance, God tells Jerusalem it’s going to hell for sacrificing its children to idols in the fires burning in the Valley of Hinnom (verse 31). “My anger and my wrath,” **verse 20**, “will be poured out on this place, on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the on the fruit of the ground, and it will burn and not be quenched.” The slaughter would be so great “they will bury their dead in Topheth until there is no more room,” **verse 32**.

Topheth was another name for the Valley of Hinnom, also known as GEHENNA, a name also used for hell in Scripture, where fires were always burning. The valley they sacrificed their children in, therefore, was the hell they themselves would perish in. And did it happen? Yes, it did. Between 589 and 587 BC, Jerusalem suffered the full force of God’s fury in the battle with Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, resulting in Jerusalem being burnt to the ground and left a smouldering ruin.

We can rest assured, therefore, that God follows through in his punishment on the wicked. When God promises hell on people, hell is what they get.

And then we come to **Matthew 23**, perhaps the most serious and lengthy example of criminal charges, accusation and sentencing by God himself in Scripture. It's the mother of all court cases that would pack the gallery with those seeking justice, because in the dock are all those people that make your skin crawl.

They are the slippery snakes that by charm and looking good get themselves into positions of power. Jesus knows the type well, **verses 27-28**: "You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones....you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." And in **verse 25**: "You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence." Oh, they look good on the surface but it's only after they've been voted into power, or only after they've made a girl pregnant, or only after they've got your money, do their true colours appear. They are slimy, sickening excuses of humanity who are rotten to the core.

They sicken Jesus too, **verse 33**: "You snakes!" he yells from the judges' bench, "You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" And isn't that what all who cry for justice want to say? Well, here is Jesus himself saying it: "Hell is coming to you awful people," he cries, **verse 35**, "upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth," and, **verse 36**, "all this will come upon this generation." They will get their come-uppance. Justice will be done. "I tell you the truth," Jesus says again in **Matthew 24:34**, "this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened."

And did they happen? Yes, they did. That entire generation of greedy, self-indulgent Jewish leaders and their entire system of power and exploitation of the poor went to hell in 70 AD. The Romans under Titus burnt the city and destroyed the temple, on exactly the same date the temple was previously destroyed in 586 BC.

And then we have the wonderful assurance of **Matthew 25:31-32** when Christ "comes in his glory" and "ALL NATIONS will be gathered before him." This time, everybody's included. No one at this point can hide or get away with charming their way into favour, because Jesus has their number and all their names are known. And he now begins a separation process (verses 32-33), sheep to the right, goats to the left.

At this point Jesus surprises everyone, however, as to why they're a sheep or a goat. And it is surprising too, because the separation is based on one very simple point: "For I was hungry," Jesus says to the sheep in **verse 35**, "and you gave me something to eat...thirsty and you gave me something to drink....a stranger and you invited me in....and you clothed me, looked after me (when I was sick) and visited me (when I was in prison)." And to these people he says, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world," **verse 34**.

But to the goats he says, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,” **verse 41**, because they DIDN’T feed, clothe and care for him. So here we have an exact repeat of why the Rich Man was in hell, why Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, and why the entire Jewish hierarchy and the temple were burnt to a smouldering ruin and cast into Gehenna in 70 AD. It’s because they were self-indulgent and greedy and cared nothing for those in need.

If there’s anyone, therefore, that you can think of in your life who fits that category - the relative who’s always criticizing your struggling child, the husband who spends the grocery money on socializing with his cronies, the councilor who does nothing for his constituency - then rest assured the day is coming when he or she will be exposed in the most public court ever convened, and justice will be done, **verse 46**: “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

And in that eternal punishment they will find no rest or relief, because they gave no rest or relief to others. It’s there they will be reminded of the people in their lives who were begging for their time, begging for a listening ear, begging like Lazarus at the temple gates for just a morsel of food, all of whom they COULD have helped, but didn’t. It wasn’t for lack of ability or time that they couldn’t help those in need, it’s because they couldn’t be bothered. They turned their heads away.

So imagine how they will feel when, in **Revelation 21:2**, they see “the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,” and to those who enter it, **verse 4**, God “will wipe every tear from their eyes,” and “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain,” and “To him who is thirsty,” **verse 6**, “I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life” - the very thing those now in hell DIDN’T do. Imagine the torment as they see what they missed right there in front of them, and the sign at the entrance to the New Jerusalem that says, **verse 27**: “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

Right to the last justice is being done. Those who turned their heads away from the poor and needy and closed their doors, will continue to live with their stinking attitudes in the worst hell of all - stuck on the outside looking in, just like the Rich Man.

To those who cry for justice, then, the good news is, every predator or ignorer of the poor and needy will meet their Maker in court, where the cruelty of their shameful and deceitful lives will be exposed, and the torment they experience will be real.

So that’s two reasons for good news regarding hell: To those who live in fear of hell, Christ’s mercy is unlimited, and to those who cry for justice, Christ’s judgment is just. There’s a third reason for good news regarding hell too - in Part 3....