

Hebrews 4:1

Let us Fear

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it (ESV)

I. Intro:

- A. I preached a sermon on hell early in my ministry. I read from Jonathan Edwards sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” – where he says:

The bow of God’s wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. ...

God...holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire;

1. As Edwards read that to his congregation in July of 1741 it is reported that “there was such a breathing of distress and weeping” that Edwards had to ask the congregation to quieten down so he could be heard.¹

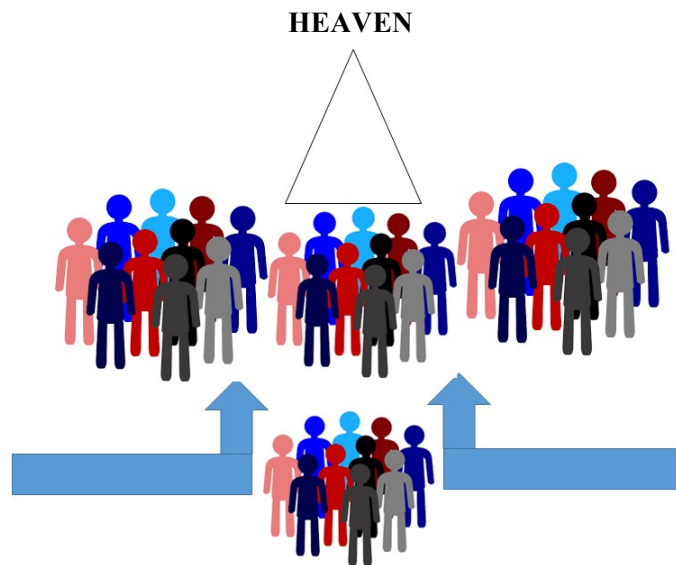
- B. I went on and described the fresco of the Last Judgment that Michelangelo painted in the Sistine Chapel. In it Jesus is judging the world. The saints are ascending to him on the left side of the fresco (Jesus’ right – Mt 24) and then on the right side of the picture (Jesus’ left – Mt 24) are the souls who have been damned descending into hell where they are clearly in anguish being dragged, beaten and bitten by demons. It is a frightening scene.



¹ Norton Anthology v. 1 p. 245 n.1

- C. I went on through the Scriptures and read and discussed some that spoke of hell and the wrath of God. Afterwards, I spoke of the hope – the only hope we have in Jesus to escape that horrible judgement and the terrors of hell.
 - D. At the end of the service as I stood at the door, way too many people said, “That was a nice sermon”. The sermon was on hell and the fear of hell! I learned then that you really can’t evaluate a message based on what people say going out the door. They should have said – and if you ever want to say something to the pastor as you leave – it should be something that has to do with how the message opened up Jesus or refreshed your heart and mind upon the greatness of the gospel. “I am thankful for Jesus who saves me from such a horror”. Something like that.
- II. This morning our text begins (in the Greek) with the word “Let us fear”. NASB
- A. We find the author of Hebrews talking about fear several times in his book.
 - 1. **Heb 10:26-31** – If we sin deliberately there is a fearful prospect of judgment and a fury of fire...and it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.
 - 2. **Heb 12:18ff** – The people in the Wilderness trembled in fear at Mt Zion. We are not to refuse the one who is speaking, Jesus, because we will not escape if we do. Refusing Jesus will be far worse for us than it was for the people in the Wilderness who refused to listen to Moses.
- III. So when our text says, “Let us fear” what are we to fear?
- A. **Heb 3:15-4:5** – Our author reminds us that the first generation of people who came out of Egypt with Moses failed to enter God’s rest. They all died in the wilderness, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb.
 - 1. That first generation left the slavery of Egypt desiring the rest God would give them in the Promised Land (Ex 33:14). But they failed to enter that rest because of unbelief (Heb 3:19). “Going out” of Egypt is not the same as believing or trusting in the Lord. It is quite possible to be in the church, yet not believe in Jesus. It is possible to have a formal relationship with Jesus, but not a personal relationship with him. We can have theological views of Jesus, without necessarily knowing what it means to have Jesus deal with our life or our sins.
 - 2. And if that formal stance is anyone’s position, then our text says to be fearful of such an acquaintance with Jesus. You will not enter God’s eternal rest, which is also known as heaven.
 - B. **And if we fail to enter that rest, then what?** Heb 4:3 – We face the wrath of God. We do not enter his rest. Instead we enter into hell. Heb 10:26-27
 - C. Hell in the Bible is given to us in pictorial language; analogous language; symbolic language. We don’t really know exactly what hell is. We don’t really know what heaven is, except through similes and pictorial and symbolic language...streets of gold, a river of life... for heaven. And hell, a lake of fire, darkness and weeping. These are descriptions that paint a picture of what heaven or hell is like...what it is similar to.
 - 1. I think the reason heaven and hell are described for us in pictorial language and similes is in part due to just how intensely great they (heaven) or terrible (hell) really are.
 - 2. The descriptions excite our imagination. Our imagination helps us sense the intensity in a way far greater than an actual description ever would. We gain a truer fuller sense of hell’s horrors and heaven’s glories.
 - a. In the middle of the night you hear a thump in the house. You picture in your mind a burglar and you can hear your heart pounding. You hold your breath and try to listen, hoping you don’t hear anything else.
 - b. Your imagination and the period of time you lie awake listening intensifies the fear for a moment.

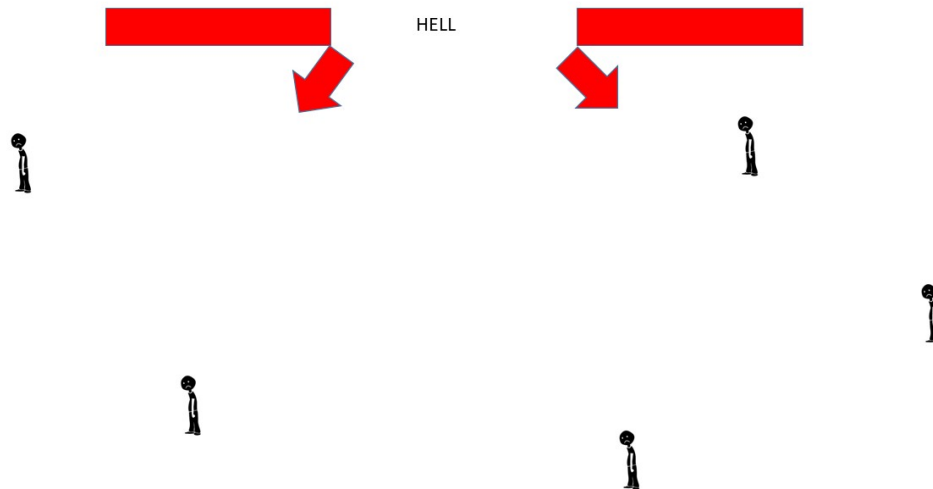
- c. And that is what the pictorial language of heaven and hell do. As we wonder what a place with streets of gold might actually be like; or what a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth is actually like – we get a sense of how intense – how wonderful or fearful – beyond words heaven and hell really are.
 - D. So as I read through Hebrews and thought of hell and let my imagination go - my mind went not so much to Edwards or Michelangelo's depiction of hell, but rather C S Lewis' imaginary portrayal of hell.² It seems to line up with some of what we have in our text and other parts of the book. It gives our minds another picture.
- IV. I want to start by looking at **Heb 12:22-23** and the description of heaven. Here we read that the heavenly Mt Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem is described as having innumerable angels in a festal **gathering** and also with them is the assembly of the first-born –that is the church.
- A. The picture is that heaven is a place **above** where the angels and the church **gather** around the Trinity – God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Gathered together** we all offer worship to him (12:28).



- B. And so if **heaven is up** and **all are joined together around God** then hell would be just the opposite of that. In hell the people do not gather – they spread out – they are dispersed. They go down and out.³

² Jerry Root, a Wheaton prof in a You tube lecture CS Lewis and the power of the imagination. <https://youtu.be/pDHPuPmY-gk>. Root lays out Lewis' view of hell which I borrowed in various sections of this lesson.

³ See Jerry Root for his reading of Lewis and hell.



- V. The second picture of heaven we have is in Hebrews 4. Here we see **the rest** which God has in store for us. Our text is highlighting the idea of rest. In this text we have **the promised rest** (4:1); **the Promised Land is also called a rest** (4:8); we have **the Sabbath rest of God** (4:4). Heaven is going to be a place of rest – security – peace.
- A. And so if rest is what we who believe have ahead of us, then it may very well be that **hell is a place where there is no rest**
- VI. Then third, and this helps us answer the question can we lose our salvation? And it is this – while on the Day of Judgment Jesus sends people to hell, there is also a sense in Hebrews that **hell is a place that people choose to go to.**⁴ Now that may make us stop and think and raise questions. The question that because we are believers. We love Jesus. We thank him and praise him for his salvation and look forward to the day when all of the saints will gather together in festal garments with the angels and rejoice forever before the Lord. We cannot even remotely imagine choosing hell over heaven.⁵
- A. But some people don't want any part of heaven or of God's presence. They do not appreciate the blood of Jesus shed for them. They see no need for it. They despise the very idea that they would need such a thing. They willfully reject it.
1. They say the very thing to God that we read in **Job 21:13-14** where the wicked live their days in prosperity and go down to the grave and say to God, "Depart from us! We do not desire the knowledge of thy ways." Rather than seek God's presence at death – they reject it. They tell God to go away. They do not want to have anything to do with him.
 2. We said a couple of weeks ago that Christians do not lose their salvation. They hold onto Jesus to the end.
 3. But there are some, evidently, that the author of the book of Hebrews is addressing, who are in with the church, but don't believe. They are like the people we mentioned a moment ago who came out of Egypt with Moses. But coming out of Egypt does not mean that they believed in God. And now when the pressure is on – they actively deny Jesus. They turn away and spurn the blood of Jesus. In other words – they reject him. They tell him to depart. That is what apostasy is.

⁴ Apostasy is a choice people make in Hebrews.

⁵ Root, ibid

4. And here is how apostasy comes about. We can see it in the OT wilderness example. Time and time again the people in the wilderness had opportunities to be faithful. But instead they murmured, rejected Moses and rejected the Lord.
 - a. For example in **Num 14** the Israelites murmur and rebel against Moses because they hear about the giants in the Promised Land. They think it would be better to go back to Egypt.
 - b. They are not only rebelling against Moses and Joshua and Caleb, but God says they rejected him (**Num 14:11**).
 - c. When they rejected God, God gives them what they chose. They chose not to believe and trust God, but rather to turn from him. So God gives them their desire.
 - d. And that is what apostasy is. It is a person's heartfelt rejection of God's grace and his Son. It is choosing trust in self above trust in the Lord. That is the difference between Peter and Judas. Both denied Jesus. One repented. For the other, Judas, denial and despair⁶⁶ was his final disposition and will. He wanted a Messiah to conform to his own ideas. He did not want the Messiah on the terms God sent him to us. He rejected that. He was apostate. And the apostate do not enter God's rest – rather he faces God's wrath and hell. God gives him what he desired – what he chose.
 - e. To us – such a desire or decision is foolish. Damning. To the one who rejects God– it is their wisdom and desire.
 - f. In **Milton's Paradise Lost** after Satan and his followers rebel and are cast in defeat into hell, they are gathered in Pandemonium, their capital, where they discuss what to do next.
 - 1) One spirit calls for open war again with heaven. His argument is, what is there to lose?
 - 2) Another argues there is much to lose. Better the chains they now have than greater chains.
 - 3) And then the 3rd speaks. His name is Mammon. He knows war with heaven is futile. And even if God offered grace to them, he says, "*Suppose he should relent And publish Grace to all, on promise made Of new Subjection; with what eyes could we Stand in his presence humble, and receive Strict Laws imposed, to celebrate his Throne With warbled Hymns, and to his Godhead sing Forced Halleluiah's;*"⁷
 - 4) For Mammon, even if God would show his grace and allow them to return to heaven, he could not see himself and the other rebels singing God's praise. **He would rather stay in hell than sing God's praise.** His view is that they all ought to just make themselves at home in hell. Besides, he sees gold and gems and thinks he can make something of it. Earlier in Book I (line 263) we get the well-known line "*Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven*". That is the thought of those who reject God.
 - 5) Sinners who refuse God's grace – who tell him to Depart - in a real sense prefer hell to heaven.

VII. Now to CS Lewis and the Great Divorce.

- A. In The Great Divorce Lewis reminds us in the preface that his book is **not meant** to arouse **factual** curiosity in people. It is meant to stir the imagination and cause us to think. The book helps us, as our text says, to "fear" as we allow our minds to reflect

⁶⁶ Satan in Paradise Lost despaired and could not repent.

⁷ Paradise Lost Book II line 235ff

upon hell using the means of fiction and our imagination to direct our gaze upon the truth. It helps us think on just how intensely awful hell really is.

- B. The Great Divorce is a story of a guy who dies and goes to hell. He along with everyone else there is given an opportunity to take a bus ride out of hell and into heaven and stay there instead of returning to hell.
1. There are a few at the bus stop to take the trip. But some of them fight and quarrel and become impatient and frustrated with the process and get out of line. They chose not to get on the bus and in effect stay in hell. And when everyone boards the bus, there is plenty of room. Evidently a lot of people made that same choice. (*Great Divorce* p. 14)
 2. As they are riding they begin to talk. Our guy notices that the town is not very full. Large parts of it were empty. He asks if there was ever much of a population there. Another rider tells him, "No". The people are too quarrelsome. When someone moves in near, they fight and they move out. They go further and further out.
 3. The people who have been there a while are out astronomical distances. They have moved millions and millions of miles away from each other. The guy is disappointed in this. He thought in hell he would meet some interesting historical characters. But no. They are too spread out.
 4. The closet one to them is Napoleon. It took 15,000 years for 2 chaps to walk out to find him. And when they found him he was pacing back and forth saying "It was Soult's fault. It was Ney's fault. (2 of his generals who he is blaming for the Waterloo loss); It was Josephine's fault (his ex-wife and love of his life). It was the fault of the Russian. It was the fault of the English. *"Like that all the time. Never stopped for a moment. A little, fat man and he looked kind of tired. But he did not seem able to stop."*⁸(p. 20)
- C. Do you see how Lewis depicts hell?
1. Many or most people at the bus stop decide the trip to see what heaven is about is too inconvenient or troublesome so they choose to stay in hell. Most others do not even bother to go. The bus has plenty of open seats.
 2. And then the people in hell – which is in the downward direction – are spread out and far away from one another. They isolate themselves. They can't stand to have others around. They move further and further out and away.
 - a. After God made the heavens and earth and finished ordering his creation and filling it – he made man and then said it is not good for man to be alone. And it is not. We are made to have fellowship with God and with one another.
 - b. This coronavirus has led us to a sort of isolation. I think most everyone is pretty much tired of this. It is very similar to the picture that Lewis is painting for us of hell. Isolation – socially distant - eternally – from others.
 - c. Fellowship is one of the things some of the Hebrews were neglecting – **Heb 10:25**. One positive effect of the coronavirus is that we have been reminded just how valuable and necessary our fellowship together is. I think it also paints a picture of what hell might be like. Alone. Away from others. Eternally.
 3. Then the 3rd element of hell from Lewis – is the restlessness of hell. Napoleon paces back and forth blaming everyone. He does not accept any blame for the defeats or wrongs in his life. And he can't seem to stop. It is relentless. Though he seems tired, there is no stopping. Hell is restless.
 - a. **Lady MacBeth**, after she murders Duncan, tries to wash the blood off her hands. The blood represents her guilt. She says "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather The multitudinous

⁸ The Great Divorce, CS Lewis, p. 20; Root, *ibid*.

seas incarnadine.” In other words – there is not enough water in the oceans to cleanse her guilt – if she used it all – it would turn the green oceans red.

- b. Sin and guilt are relentless. They do not allow our hearts and souls to rest.
- c. It is very telling that Lewis’ guy finds Napoleon blaming everyone else for his failures and problems, except himself. The way that we find rest for our souls – Jesus tells us in Matthew 11:28 – Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.
 - 1) We come acknowledging our sin, repenting of it and asking Jesus to be the atonement, expiation, propitiation (all terms in Heb 3) – to bear our sin, remove the guilt of our sin and make us right before God. And when we do that – he grants us rest.

VIII. Our text calls its readers to fear. There were some who may not have given much thought to their position before the Lord. They went to church. They had Christian friends. They were decent people. But they wanted God on their own terms. They never really trusted in Jesus or thought they had much need for him.

A. That kind of relationship with Jesus is a rejecting one. An unfaithful one.

- 1. A relationship where we want God on our own terms or never really see our need for Jesus is one to fear because ultimately it is one that chooses hell over heaven. It chooses a belief in yourself over a belief in Jesus.
- 2. And God lets us reap what we sow. If we reject him, we are in effect choosing hell with its unending isolation and restlessness.

B. The gospel of Jesus Christ and the hope we have in him gives us a far greater prospect ahead. Let your thoughts and imagination linger on the promises and pictures we have of God’s rest, the gathering together of all of the saints who have gone before us, along with all of heaven’s angels before God’s throne forever in peace and security and plenty.

- 1. Between now and that time, we believers may stumble, as Peter did; we may have doubts, as Thomas. But we hold on to the end believing and trusting that our salvation is in Jesus Christ.