

**One Hell of a Story?
A Brief Account of Mathew's Portrait of Hell and The End**

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In Louis Malle's *My Dinner With Andre*, two old friends talk through dinner about life, love, death and life as acting. Andre, a well known theater director, tells the playwright Shawn of a Halloween ceremony he participated in on Long Island. Some friends in white sheets solemnly led him to the basement of a burned house, where he was given paper and told to write his last testament about his life. He was then led blindfolded from there through fields to another house. Undressed, he was laid upon a stone table where he was carefully washed and dried. From there his friends led him outside to an open grave. He was blindfolded again and laid upon a plank; he was slowly lowered into the grave, and then covered with wooden planks. As he tells the story Andre grows visible more upset. Contemplating death dominated Andre's conversation with Shawn, and this Halloween "celebration" still left him deeply unnerved.

Andre's story brings together many elements of the end of life: a final careful scrutiny of one's actions; the ritual preparation of the body; lowering the body into the earth.

Surrounding that story was his fear of the unknown, fear of the dark, the discomfort of looking through one's long life and discovering that he wasted his opportunities, ignored the pain of those closest to him, that he chose to perform rather than to live. Death's dark finality is combined with the difficulty of casting light upon one's life. One of the themes of Mathew's Gospel, it appears to me, is this contrast of light and dark.

Throughout the Gospel there are announcements, behold!-ing, revelations, appearances.

Highlights of this are the appearance of the Messiah's prophet, John; and his announcement of the coming Kingdom. This proceeds through Jesus' contrast of appearance versus reality in the Sermon on the Mount and his turning the world upside down to expose Kingdom truth, encouraging his listeners to see (and to listen) rightly. Chapter 13 sees Jesus explain that he purposefully blinded the righteous to the truth; the Sadducees and the Pharisees ask for a special sign of his Chooseness in chapter 16; and as if in response the Transfiguration occurs to a select few of the disciples in chapter 17.

Jesus' Good News unveils the surprising Kingdom, the upside-down justice of lost sinners receiving unmerited mercy. *This* spirit of reconciliation is therefore the basis for my comments on Jesus' preaching about Hell in this Gospel. I'm going to concentrate on the different accounts Jesus gives of the state of affairs awaiting people at "the End." The "End" includes the human state after death, following the coming of the Kingdom with Jesus' promised return and the Judgment. I will argue that Jesus offers a variety of accounts of "the End", few of which include punishment or purgation in hell. Hell makes up a pretty small part of the bewildering variety of pictures Jesus paints of the Judgment and the Last Things. It is necessary to see who makes up Jesus' audience when He speaks of the End, and the sins He singles out. A good deal of His Hell-talk is best interpreted as hyperbole for the sake of illustrating the seriousness of God's judgment, rather than a metaphysics of divine judgment in the End. I'll divide these vocabularies of the End into three groups: the End as Fire, the End as Outer Darkness or the Abyss, and the End as Hell. Finally, I'll discuss chapters 24 and 25, Jesus' portrait of the Last Things, as a combination of those three.

I. Fire

In the beginning of Mathew's Gospel (3:7-12), John the Baptist tells the Pharisees and Sadducees to prove their repentance by good fruit—lives befitting obedience to God. He promises them that every tree that fails to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire. He then warns them that the Messiah will come and baptize with fire as well as the Spirit, sifting the grain and burning the chaff in a fire “that can never be put out.” It is unclear from the passage whether the chaff speaks to individuals or some sinful part of them; whether it speaks to an entire community or group; or if the fire is punishment, destruction, or purification.¹

Latter, in the Kingdom parables, Jesus spoke of fire and the Last Days (13:24-43). His audience, the crowd following him around the Sea of Galilee, heard Him teach on the wheat and darnel, the mustard seed and leaven. But Jesus later explained to His disciples that He purposefully hid the meaning of these teachings inside parables, and that they alone were intended to understand them. The parable of the wheat and the darnels describes the children of the Heavenly Father and those children of the Devil living alongside one another. Jesus then suggests that in the Last Days the evil deeds and evil doers will be cast into the furnace “where there will be sobbing and grinding of teeth.” This phrase appears throughout the Gospel in such contexts; it seems to speak for the person's shocked loss of status, for her deep disappointment. Then—as if in a peculiar way directly related to the work of the furnace—will the righteous shine in the Kingdom of their Father in Heaven. Again, it is unclear if this furnace punishes or cleanses. The relationship between the wicked deeds and evil children in the fire and the shining

¹ In chapter 7:15-21 Jesus makes a similar claim, but this time to the disciples alone.

righteous seems to be a balancing of accounts, where the Heavenly Father finally brings about justice for his bedeviled children.

II. Outer Darkness; the Abyss; the Pit; Torture

Mathew opens Jesus' teaching (4:14-17) by combining two passages in Isaiah (9:1-2 and 42:6-7), suggesting that Jesus is the Promised One unveiling the Kingdom to a people in darkness, opening the eyes of the blind and releasing prisoners from the dungeon. This sets the expectation that references to light and liberty will follow; and they do.

Again to the disciples, Jesus in the middle of Mathew's Gospel (18:21-25) explains the depth of mutual forgiveness the Heavenly Father expects from His children. He illustrates the seventy time seven forgiveness with the Parable of the Wicked Servant. Forgiven an unpayable debt but unwilling to forgive one of his debtors, the unmerciful servant is ordered by his merciful Lord to be tormented until he pays all he owes. Jesus tells the disciples that God will do the same to them if they do not forgive. In this parable of the End, torture ends when God' justice is fulfilled.

After entering Jerusalem on the way to the Cross, Jesus begins to teach in the Temple (22:1-14). To a mixed crowd including His disciples, Sadducees and Pharisees, Jesus teaches of the Lord celebrating a wedding. When invited guests reject the invitation and abuse the messengers, the Lord destroys them. A guest arrives without suitable clothes is thrown out into "the outer darkness" where there is "sobbing and grinding of teeth."

Considering these passages, I think we should notice the kinds of sins punished. While Jesus may describe types of wickedness and their punishment, He appears to distinguish them from the rejection of the Son's Good News about the Heavenly Father's Kingdom.

III. Hell

Near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount (5:22 and 29-30) Jesus speaks to the disciples of Hell as punishment. Jesus redirected attention away from obedience of Torah rules and towards the Law's role in revealing inner character. Such convictions should encourage actions permitting substantial care for the well-being of others. If you call your brother a fool you "deserve hell fire." He then goes on to say that it is better to lose the part of your body that causes such sin, than to suffer whole in hell.

But it is very important to distinguish those portraits of Hell where Jesus is surely exploiting that image. In fact, these seem at least as prevalent if not more than any substantial claims Jesus makes about a existing place like Hell. It operates as an exaggerated image to suggest God's stern rejection of arrogance and assault. For instance, Jesus predicts that Capernaum's exalted status will be harshly revoked (11:23).

This use of Hell as emphasis on God's profound favoring of the humble continues in chapter 18. Vulnerable, even fragile servants lead the Kingdom Jesus describes to the disciples. The abusers and oppressors of the "little ones" should know that they will be seriously disciplined. Jesus' warning implies that whatever power or gain they may

enjoy over the humble in the community of God's children, they risk taking with them to everlasting fire (18:1-10).²

If Jesus addresses Hell-talk to an oppressed or down-trodden audience, then Hell is the promise of justice, of the rebalancing of affairs in the Kingdom. The wicked will get theirs; the poor of all kinds will be comforted. If Jesus addresses Hell-talk to the wicked, then they have the choice to repent and to follow Him; or be burned, tormented or cleansed. Either way, they are rhetorics of comfort or persuasion, much more so than a metaphysics of the End.

IV. The End: Chapters 24 and 25

After the disciples marvel at the majesty of Herod's Temple, Jesus tells them that it will be destroyed. They ask for an explanation in the context of the Last Things. I agree with N.T. Wright's explanation that Jesus is teaching an eschatology of the Temple religious economy coming to an end, replaced by the Kingdom of the Son of God.³ The Son will return, and His Second Appearance will be as Noah's day. That picture of a watery judgment also recalls the Deep, a watery Abyss. Jesus had earlier alluded to it when he told the disciples and later the Pharisees and Sadducees that the sign of God's favor would be that of Jonah (12:38-42, 16:1-4).⁴ This imagery also echoes the opening account of Jesus' teaching, liberating prisoners from the pit, from darkness, from prison.

² In another version of this hyperbole, Jesus later will tell the disciples that the Pharisees and Scribes teach in such a way as to turn their students into greater children of Hell than themselves (23:13-15).

³ *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (InterVarsity, 1999), 46-7, and chs. 3, 4

⁴ Jonah 2:1-9 recounts the prophet crying to God from inside the fish, from Sheol, from the Abyss, banished from God's sight. The entire book recounts Jonah preaching God's judgment and destruction of Nineveh, but His surprising mercy upon them following their repentance.

Throughout the two chapters Jesus repeatedly teaches that “The Kingdom of Heaven will be like...” In the Parable of the Delayed Lord’s Wicked Servant (24: 45-51), Jesus teaches that the Wicked Servant will be thrown among the hypocrites, where they will sob and grind their teeth. Again, the Kingdom turns the world upside down; the mighty and the proud are overthrown, the humble and the weak are exalted.

The parable of the Ten Virgins (25:1-13) describes those who, failing to prepare for the Lord’s wedding, are locked outside the celebration. They delayed preparing and are therefore cast out into the darkness. In the parable of the Unprofitable Servant (25:14-30), Jesus also shows him cast out “into outer darkness”. This oft-repeated curse suggests extreme isolation, far from company and comfort. This may also recall the opening of Jesus’ teaching. Those who were in darkness and have seen the light, have rejected or failed to prepare for the full revelation of the Light of God’s Son and His Kingdom, and are therefore cast back into darkness.

The master who returns takes gifts from the lazy or frightened, and casts them into outer darkness. As Ryan Pendell has suggested, this Master is unpredictable and even foolish with his money and power. To obey Him is therefore to risk something, something He actually gives His servants. Following the commands of the Master is risky, but if she does so the Master will reward her with the means to obey Him. This extravagant Master throws His wealth and power around, giving it indiscriminately to those quite possibly unable and unqualified to do anything with it. This Lord may frighten the servants. They expect Him like other lords to be predictably cruel. Such frightened servants are prudent.

The more qualified, prepared, and careful the servant—what we wish all our servants and ourselves in our professions were like—the less likely they are to trust this Master. A life lived in sensible service to this Master will, at the End when the Master returns to ask His servants what they've done in His absence, will therefore inspire real disappointment.

Immediately following this parable is the one account of fire in this entire portrait of The End. Like a shepherd the Son will separate people, as Sheep and Goats. The latter go to everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and his angels. Unlike portraits in some of the parables, those who are punished acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God. The sin punished here is unique: failing to see the Son of God incarnated in the poor, the hungry, in the prisoner. Those who do so are just as surprised to discover Jesus incarnated in the poor as were the wicked. The contrast again is extremes: everlasting life and comfort vs. everlasting punishment. The “everlasting” state, consistent with Jesus’ oft-used hyperbole to make His point, drives home this sin’s seriousness. The reward the comforters receive in the Kingdom is so great as to merit the phrase “everlasting”. Likewise, the punishment of those who ignore the destitute is so great as to also be without end. They should not hope for comfort or relief. As elsewhere in Mathew, Jesus pits opposites against one another to emphasize the seriousness of God’s demand. The consistent theme is that when the arrival of the Kingdom will shock everyone. The Good News upsets *everyone’s expectations*.

Conclusion

We must be consider that such a variety of accounts of The End do not warrant certainty about its precise nature. There is more than *one* Hell in this story. Throughout Mathew there are in fact several stories of the End alongside those about Hell. We trust that God will save the lost, and that He will secure justice for all, consistent with His love for humankind and the Creation. This justice will be compassionate, and, as the parables suggest, surprising.

It is significant that Jesus fulfills his prophecy of chapter 12:38-42 (and 16:1-4)—Jonah in the fish, the Son of God in the heart of the earth—when He is murdered and buried. Jesus goes into the Abyss, in the later Christian tradition (ex. the Apostle’s Creed) descending into Hell itself. As St. Paul would suggest, Jesus obeyed the Father, even to death (Philippians 2:5-8). Atonement theories included purification and cleansing as part of Jesus’ death on the Cross (Hebrews chs. 9, 10). The final portrait then of Jesus is of sharing with all people, even those who rejected Him, the very punishment He warned awaited them. All the various portraits of the End—the Abyss, the Outer Darkness, just punishment, Hell and purification—were summed up in Jesus’ death.

The Beatitudes tell the People of God to live up to their status as chosen, but without arrogance. They are not to live their chooseness in acts of revolt or vengeance.⁵ Thus, don’t preach about the Good News of the Kingdom in such a way that intentionally frightens, divides or alienates. The Good News is scandalous enough in its undeserved grace, its unethical favor to the unfavorable and undeserving. It does not need the added extra of terror or compulsion. Instead, the Good News ought to reconcile, to show

⁵ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 47.

mercy, to bring peace. But when Jesus suggested that he brought a sword (10:34), this Good News of the Kingdom *itself* will divide us.

Throughout the whole Gospel, through all of them, *what is the News?* It certainly was not new to Palestinian Jews that after death they faced eternal and full life or eternal punishment. Hell talk was not news to them.⁶ But the story of God's gracious and unmerited compassion, redemption through the God-incarnate Son? That was certainly news. In that kind of setting I would argue Jesus moderated if not overwhelmed his community's Hell talk and its accompanying *modus operandi*, the purity code system and the code of pious living.

After Peter confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus tells the disciples that this conviction is the basis for the Kingdom of Heaven, a Kingdom so powerful that it will break down the very doors of Hell (16:18). In *My Dinner With Andre*, Andre finished his Halloween story, and told Shawn that after being lowered into the pit, he was shortly pulled up, released from his blindfold and bonds, and free to run back through the field to a party with a warm fire and hot wine. This resurrection shocked him because of the whole previous experience contemplating his death and burial. Jesus taught about Hell; He took Hell very seriously. Jesus had to take Hell very seriously, because He lived, died and rose from the dead to keep His promise: to deliver all humanity from it.

⁶ If anything, portraits of Hell in the inter-testamental writings (such as 1 Enoch, 4 Sibylline Oracles, and the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*) were more vindictive measure-for-measure punishments, or total destructions by fire.