

Is Hell real?

by Fr. Stephen Freeman (*)

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**Fr. Stephen discusses the
Orthodox understanding of the
difference of Heaven and Hell and
some of its implications for how
we speak about them.**

One of the more interesting cultural aspects of religious life in the southern United States is something of this culture's fascination with Hell. It is nothing at all to be driving down country roads and to see signs posted with various scriptures on them. I know today it is popular to see signs at almost every televised football game that say simply, "3:16," meaning John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, etc."

I grew up in a world that had not only that, but signs along many roads with great warnings, particularly, about Hell, and how much danger we were all in, in terms of going to Hell. Recently, doing a little surfing on the internet, I came across a fundamentalist Christian website that gave the following statistics. I am not sure how they arrive at these statistics, but they are fascinating, obviously, to some Christians.

They offered this as the number of people going to Hell. They said there were 1.72 persons, per second, going to

Hell. There were 103 persons, per minute, going to Hell, 6198 per hour, 149,000 per day—149,000 per day, an amazing number—54.3 million per year, and 3.8 billion per average lifetime, that is, every 70 years. Those are interesting numbers. I have no idea where they got them. There is, as far as I know, not an accounting department in Heaven or Hell that can come up with such numbers, but there is a fascination with these kinds of things.

Recently, my town here in East Tennessee has become the location for a major national evangelical revival, one that everyone would probably be very familiar with. There is a lot of organization, particularly in the Protestant world, going on to support this crusade and their efforts. There are a lot of signs appearing all around town, and many other organizational meetings that are happening.

On one of the roads leading into my little town of Oak Ridge, I think we have maybe three or four roads that you can get into Oak Ridge on, but on one of them, on which thousands of cars pass by every day, there is a billboard that has recently appeared. The sign is quite simple. In very large, bright yellow letters, all CAPS, very bright so you can see them for a very great distance, it has a black background. The sign says, "Hell IS REAL." Now, in small letters beneath it, in white, when you get very close to the sign—it sort of teases you as you get close, so that you want to see what the little white letters say. The sign has the statement, "So is Heaven," in small letters. Big letters: "Hell IS REAL." Small letters: "So is Heaven."

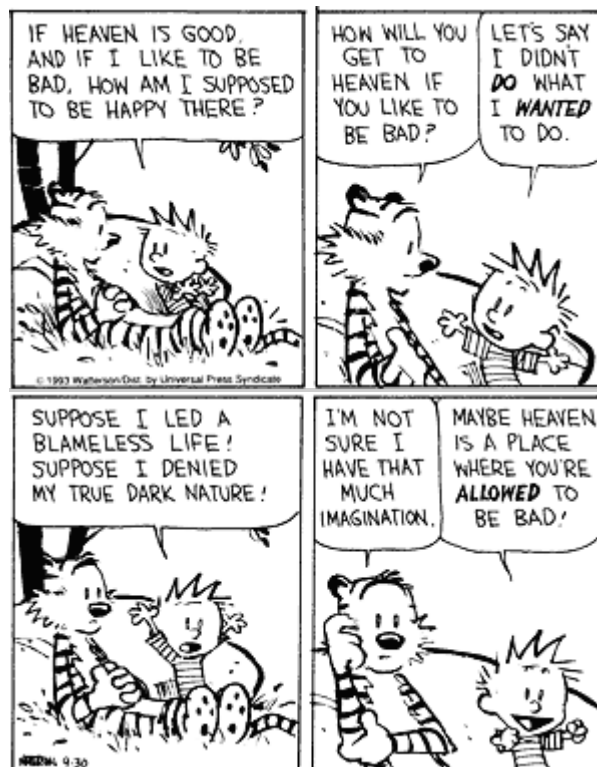
Like the small bulletin boards outside of many southern churches, this sign belongs to a part of our culture that has been with us a long time. I use this road rather frequently, and every time I see this sign, my mind turns to the subject of what in theology and philosophy is called ontology. That means the study of the nature of being. You can add that word to today's vocabulary list: ontology—the study of being.

Today, if you will, and I beg your patience, and I will offer some very basic thoughts on the subject of being, of ontology. It is a classical part of Christian theology.

The first thing that I will note, is that you cannot say Hell is real, and Heaven is real, and have the word real mean the same thing in both sentences. Whatever the reality of Heaven, Hell does not have such a reality. Whatever the reality of Hell, Heaven is far beyond such reality.

St. Athanasius, in his great classic work, *On the Incarnation*, sees sin, and thus, Hell itself, as a movement toward non-being. The created universe, he notes, was made out of nothing. Thus, as it moves away from God, it is moving away from the gift of existence, and toward its original state, that is, non-existence. God is good, and does not begrudge existence to anything. Thus, the most creation can do is move toward non-being. It cannot make itself just not exist. That is not within its power.

I am certain that the intent of this billboard that I have to see most days was to suggest that Hell is not imaginary, or just a folk tale, and it is certainly neither of those things. But in Orthodox spiritual terms, and this is important—**in Orthodox spiritual terms, I would say that Hell is a massive state of delusion, maybe even the ultimate state of delusion.**



It is delusional in the sense that in Orthodox understanding, the fire of Hell is not a material fire. This is something that has been settled quite solidly in Orthodox theology, that the fire of Hell is not a material fire, but is, itself, nothing other than the fire of the Living God. As it says in Hebrews 12:29, "For our God is a consuming fire." For those who love God, His fire is light and life, purification, and all good things. For those who hate God, His fire is torment, even though it is nothing other than love. They find His love, His light, to be a torment.

These are not simply picky issues about the afterlife. They are very germane issues for our present life. Christ, Himself, for instance, gave this, if you will, definition, of Hell. He says in John 3:19, just three verses after John 3:16, "And this is condemnation (if you will, this is Hell), that light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."

As you think about the life of Christ, particularly as we head into this Holy Week, we can see this being manifested in the lives of the people of Jerusalem, as Christ comes to His own. Some embrace him as Lord and Messiah, some even manage to stand by His cross and are faithful. One, a thief, confesses him and finds Paradise in a single moment. But for many others, even many so-called religious people, the very presence of Christ is something that makes them, not only want to do evil, it makes them want to murder, so that they can shout, "Crucify Him!" This they say to the light, so this is condemnation, that light has come into the world and men preferred darkness to the light because their deeds were evil.

It is of critical importance for us to understand that being, reality, life, goodness, beauty, happiness, truth—all of them are synonymous with reality, as it is gifted to us by God. Many things that we experience in our currently damaged condition—and I am speaking of our state as fallen creatures—many things that we describe with words, such as being, reality, life, goodness, beauty, happiness, truth, etc., that are, in fact, only relatively so, and are only so in as much as they have a participation, or a relationship, with the

fullness of being, reality, life, beauty, etc. as God has gifted them to us.

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So it is that, tragically, in our world, many live in some state of delusion. Even most of us live in some state of delusion. Christ said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." The truth is, we are not pure in heart, and so we do not see God, nor do we see anything in the fullness of its truth. Our delusion makes many mistakes about reality. The most serious delusion that is described by Christ when we prefer darkness to light because our deeds are evil—this is by far the most serious delusion. It can cause us to hate goodness, itself. It can cause us to hate beauty. It can cause us to hate reality, cause us to hate the light, to hate God, Himself.

I have known, in my own life, what moments of such darkness are like. The details of that are between me and my confessor. I have also seen such darkness in the hearts and lives of others, and more than once. The whole of our ministry and life as Christians is to move from such darkness into the light of Christ. As we are told in 1 John 1:7, "But if we walk in the light, as Christ is in the light, we have fellowship (it says we have communion, *koinonia*), one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, His son, cleanses us from all sin."

Is Hell real? Only for those who prefer to see the light of God as darkness. Is Heaven real? Yes, indeed, and everything else is only real as it relates to that reality. God give us grace to walk in the light. Glory to God!

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