

The Incinerator A Floor Below

Various Passages
Pastor Zeke B Pipher

(GA) Ellis Island (picture) – the 27-acre landmass about 300 feet off of the New Jersey City coastline – became known as the “Island of Hope” for people from several countries. This little island received over 12 million people between 1892 and 1954. My relatives from Ireland likely passed through Ellis Island.

A. What a moment it must have been to reach America. Once the ships docked, investigators boarded and everyone was asked 29-questions – things like family name, occupation, how much money or what possessions they had in their possession. Also, questions to get at each person’s health.

1. You see, for many people, Ellis Island became the place their dreams began. Once they made it off the island, they were free to chase the American dream.

2. But, sadly, for many people, Ellis Island became the death of their dreams. It became the final chapter of their lives... a chapter of horror.

a. People who traveled by ship caught all sorts of diseases and parasites and infections. If the investigator discovered you were sick, you’d get marked with a blue magic marker and sent to the hospital, housed in the Great Hall.

i. This was an unusual hospital. It dealt with so much sickness, disease, and death, that to remain efficient it had to install an incinerator in the basement, right under the hospital.

b. The New York Times wrote an article on this hospital. The author, Albert Perisi, writes, “There are grim reminders of the island’s legacy of tears. Still left untouched and not open to the public are such areas as the hospital’s basement morgue and crematorium, where victims of disease, unattended during long ocean voyages in cramped and unsanitary steerage quarters, found their ultimate destination.”

B. Can you imagine being a patient, lying in bed all day with an infection or disease, knowing there’s a crematorium running full-steam the floor below you?

1. Everyday, watching smoke and ash wafting up from the basement, creeping along the building, and up past your window... reminding you of what may lie ahead, or I should say “below,” if things didn’t change course for you.

a. Living a floor above the incinerator would make a person incredibly missional with their life. “I’m getting healthy and out of here as soon as possible! I’m going to help everyone I can, too...”

2. The awareness of flames meant no more games!

a. That’s what living a floor above the incinerator does to a person.

(SN) Or, I should say, “That’s what living a floor above the incinerator **should** do to a person...”

A. I did something sobering this week. I examined my thoughts & feelings. I looked at my passions... the things I feel deeply about...

1. I’ve got to admit, I’ve got a real problem. I sincerely do. I’m not passionate about the things Jesus is passionate about... not often enough.

a. I’m passionate about some of the things Jesus is passionate about...

i. Like loving my children, or my bride, or seeing Heartland thrive in this community... I share these passions with God, to some extent.

b. But there is a world of issues out there about which God is passionate... and about which I give so little thought or feeling...

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C. Do you ever feel this way? Like there's a good chance that you don't view life like God views life? Like maybe you've become calloused or numb to some spiritual realities around you?

1. We want to become like Christ – this is our challenge for 2009 – well, do we feel like Jesus feels about:

a. ...the 6,000 teenage girls forced into sexual slavery in Sierra Leone...

b. ...or the 120,000 children involved in genocide in various places across Africa, or the...

c. ...or the 3,561 children killed through abortions each day in the United States...

2. Or, most importantly, how about God's passion toward His lost children. Are we like Jesus in how He feels about the billions of people who are living their lives separated from Him... heading toward a horrible eternity?

a. God loves ALL people with His John 3:16 love – that's the love of a parent, the love you feel toward your children – God loves lost people with that love. And so it breaks His heart that they don't know Him.

i. Do we share this passion? Seriously... does it break our hearts that people don't know Jesus as their Savior?

3. I admit, and I'm embarrassed to say this to you as your pastor, but I can be so dull-hearted about God's passions.

a. And I don't think I'm alone in this...

D. I look at the church in America, and there's *some* neat things happening, but not enough. If we were passionate, as He is passionate, we'd...

1. Do more to help the sick... the poor... the afflicted and abused...

2. But mainly we'd do more to introduce Jesus to the unsaved!

E. So why don't we? What's missing? What are we lacking that keeps us from being passionate?

1. Are we missing good preaching... good doctrine? Are we short on Bibles? Do we lack good churches or seminaries or freedoms here in America?

a. No, we are rich, blessed Christians in these ways.

F. So why aren't we more passionate to relieve people's burdens and help them meet the Savior?

1. I will probably ask that question about the church, *and myself*, all my life. But I'm convinced that one of the answers is that we've forgotten about the incinerator in the basement.

a. We're missing the perspective of how close hell is... and how narrowly we escaped it!

1. You could say, an awareness of flames means no more games!

(S) Our problem is that we've lost that awareness... So, I want to do something I've never done from the pulpit – I want to take a peek into the basement. I want us to visit – just quickly – the horrible reality of hell.

A. I was out at Mike Toukan's this past week. Mike just built a shed and he's warming it with a wood-burning furnace.

1. On Thursday night, Mike gave me a tour of the building, showing me last of all the wood-burning furnace. This thing was awesome! When he opened the door a wave of heat billowed out and, I'm not kidding, singed my beard-hairs!

a. You've stared into a fire, right? It makes you feel pretty fragile. It humbles you. Probably because we know firsthand how painful and gross burning skin feels. Many of us have even smelled the sickening smell of burning hair or flesh.

i. Fire has always humbled me.

- a. When I was in second grade a fireman came and gave a presentation at our school on the dangers of fire. The pictures and stories he shared created a phobia in my little second-grade heart.
 - i. I didn't sleep well for months. To this day, I always turn off the lights in the house and look in each room to make sure that no candles are lit... I always check the stove to make sure the "surface hot" light is off...
 - b. Staring at the coals inside Mike's furnace – some pink, some red, some almost white – pulsating with heat – I was reminded how terrifying fire is.
2. Which makes our peek into the basement terrifying to me. Hell is a place of continual fire. Only, it's not a fire a person peers into... it's a fire a person is wrapped up in.
- a. In *Matthew 25:41* we learn how God will say to unsaved people one day, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the **eternal fire** prepared for the devil and his angels."
 - b. In *Matthew 13:41*, Jesus describes hell as a "fiery furnace," and explains how the people there will be in such torment, they'll be "weeping and gnashing their teeth."
 - b. In *Luke 16*, we have the gruesome picture of hell Jesus gives us in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The Rich Man, in Jesus' story, ends up in Hell, and at one point he calls out to Abraham and begs him for relief.
 - i. It says, "And [the Rich Man] called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.'"
3. I don't know. I can't imagine it, to be honest. The idea of an eternity of unending torture – the rich man actually uses the word "torture" to describe his experience.
- a. This story is incredible because it is God specifically telling us what hell will be like. And the part that kills me, is the unending part... the Rich Man has no relief from the pain.
 - i. Getting burned to death, or near death, is bad enough... but at least when you're burned here on earth, eventually your nerve endings are destroyed and you *stop feeling* the pain.
 - a) I worked with a man, Max, at Madonna Rehabilitation Center. Max was a prison guard and he was stabbed and burned by inmates. 3rd degree burns over 90% of his body. He looked horrible. But when asked how he felt, he said he felt no pain anymore.
 - i) Max lost his ability to sense pain... and there's relief in that...
 - b. In Hell, according to Jesus, there is some supernatural preservation, or sustaining work, which allows someone to feel it... forever... to burn and smell the smell of skin and flesh being licked by fire... but not consumed.
 - i. This is why Jesus calls Hell the "unquenchable fire" in *Mark 9:43*. The fires of hell will take & take & take... and it's people will give & give & give... the process will never end.
3. Can you imagine going through that? Doesn't it make you shudder to think of going through that?
- B. And that's just it! A peek into hell should cause us to shudder to think of how narrowly **WE** escaped this unquenchable fire. Do you know how close you came to this experience?

1. Many of us watched the movie “Fireproof” this past week. Remember that train scene. Pretty intense! Remember how close that train came to taking Michael’s head off? It brushed by so closely it knocked his helmet off...

a. Hell was even closer to you than that train was to Michael. Hell had you... Hell held you in her hands... Hell was stoking the fire and preparing a place for you... and it is only because the hands of God snatched you away from hell, that you’ve escaped.

i. Paul tells us this in *Ephesians 2:12* – he says, “remember that you were at that time separated from Christ...” he goes on to say, “...having no hope and without God in the world.”

a) Paul’s writing to saved people – people who know Jesus as their Savior and by His sacrifice on their behalf – they’ve escaped hell. And Paul tells them to do what? Remember!

b. Remember how Hell held you in her grasp so tightly her spiny little fingers gripped your very bones. Hell owned you. God reminds us of this in Scripture. He tells us that we were:

i. “dead in trespasses and sins” (*Ephesians 2:1*)

ii. “separated from Christ” (*Ephesians 2:12*)

iii. “son [s and daughters] of hell” (*Matthew 23:15*)

iv. a “child of the Devil” (*John 8:44*)

v. and cursed by God (*Galatians 3:10*)

c. This is who we were... before Jesus’ sacrifice became your salvation.

i. If Jesus’ salvation has become your salvation. Friends, if you’re here today and you haven’t trusted in Jesus’ death on the cross to save you... you’re still in a horrible, horrible situation.

a) Again, I would plead with you to not leave here this morning without believing Jesus is Lord and that God raised Him from the dead. Without that faith... you’re still dead in your sins and headed for an eternity in hell.

2. But if you’re here this morning, and by the grace of God you’ve escaped this place, don’t you ever forget that it was a narrow escape. Hell once owned you...

a. Your toes ought to still feel the flames and your clothes ought to still (sniff... sniff...) smell like smoke! Mine do.

(VR) There are 162 references to Hell in the New Testament. Over 70 of these references came directly from Jesus.

A. And I’ll be the first to admit, these descriptions are tough to hear. But they are so good to revisit! An awareness of the flames helps us stop playing games. It helps us align our passions, to the passions of God!

1. What passions? What passions does Hell help us share with God? Several, but I’ll suggest three that hit me this week:

a. 1st – First of all, hell ought to make us passionately brokenhearted. I don’t know about you, but hell makes me mourn. It causes me to mourn, first, for those I love who’ve died without salvation...

i. I don’t claim to know how God’s perfect judgment will come out – but I suspect that several of my relatives are in this horrible place. My mourning for them is passionate... it is deeply sorrowful.

ii. I also mourn for those around me who appear to held in the grip of hell, but haven’t died yet.

- a) Again, I don't know God's perfect judgment... but from what I understand about salvation from the Scriptures, some of the people I love the most – who are alive – are on the wrong bus. This breaks my heart.
 - iii. When Paul thought about his Jewish kinsmen who were apart from Christ he wrote, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart." (*Romans 9:2*)
 - a) "Unceasing anguish" – that about sums up my feelings, for the people I love... who don't know Jesus.
- b. 2nd – So Hell makes us passionately sad. Hell also ought to make us passionately joyful! As Peter said, we ought to have "inexpressible joy!"
 - i. Because this is the NATURAL response when you've escaped something horrible.
 - a) My dad called me on Monday afternoon this past week and said that my mom was in the hospital with chest pains.
 - i) They ran a battery of tests on her, and a couple came back indicating there could be a problem. So, on Tuesday she was scheduled for a catheterization and I drove to Lincoln to be with her and dad.
 - b) At 10:00, as dad and I sat in the waiting room, anything was on the table. I mean, it's the heart...
 - i) They might find a small blockage and do a stint right then and there...
 - ii) They might find something more serious, and schedule an immediate open heart surgery right then and there...
 - iii) They might have a complication – again, it's the heart – and Tuesday might have been my mom's day.
 - c) Anything was on the table. It was horrible... so, when the doctor came back and told us that mom was 100% fine and could go home in a couple hours, you can imagine our delight.
 - i) You should have seen my mom. She was released at 1:00, and she bounced around like Tigger all day. Talk about joy!
 - a) She floated around the house when we got home... calling friend, playing with her cat, laughing at every little thing... she was giddy like a little girl.
 - ii. When you've been spared something horrible, you have outrageous joy! And what is more horrible than the eternal fires of hell...
 - a) A person aware of their narrow escape from hell will be passionately joyful.
- c. 3rd – Hell also makes us passionate to help others. When you've been rescued from the fire, the smell smoke still on you clothes... what do you do? When you know you're safe, you race back to the front line and try to help as many people as possible.
 - i. A lot of Christians don't do this, though. We say "thanks," but then we run off and play – live as if this world were a playground for rescued fire victims. We live as if the fire's been put out and everyone is safe. **The fire isn't put out, and not everyone is safe!**

- a) And while none of us wants to run back into hell's embrace... We ought to be passionate about grabbing arms and legs and hair, and pulling and tugging and working with God as He rescues people from the fires of hell!
 - ii. This is the church! This is Heartland! We are a rescue shop for people headed for the fires!
 - a) Nobody has said it better than CT Studd, when he said: "Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell."
 - iii. Running a rescue shop within a yard of hell is a hot, messy, work that leaves scars on our bodies at times. You'll singe your beard-hairs, at times.
 - a) But I say bring it on. We want to be a hospital, don't we? Shouldn't we do everything in our power to keep people from the incinerator in the basement?
- B. I admit that the doctrine of Hell is a hard one for me. It is for all of us – part of being created in the image of God means that we love other people who are created in the image of God.
 - 1. None of us wants to see anyone to go to hell... God gives us this love & concern for others. But, friends, hell is a real place. A real place that in some way is necessary for a perfect satisfaction of God's justice.
 - a. And I don't fully understand that, but I trust Him. I trust Him entirely... so I trust that Hell and is right. And just.
 - 2. And I also trust, with all my heart, that we are to be constantly aware of how narrowly we escaped this horrible reality... by the grace of God, alone!
- C. My hope is to send us out today with the smell of smoke on our clothes and the taste of ash on our tongues... that we might share the passions of Christ as a church.