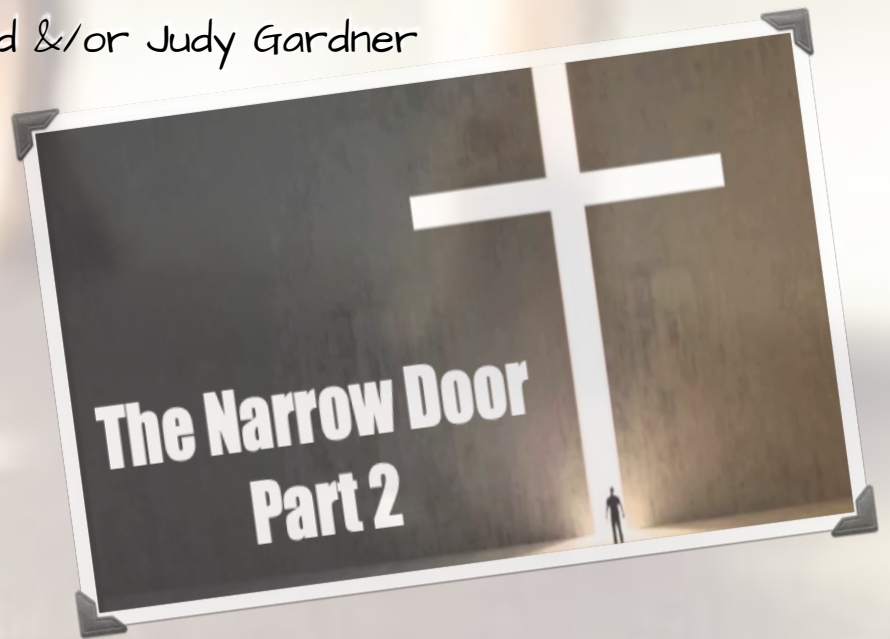


November 24-28, 2025 Edition

Following
The Year^(s) Of Jesus Part 203
The Door Is Narrow But It's Wide Open

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: [Disclaimer: these are REALLY long and probably quite convoluted. But I needed to write all of this out because I needed to work out what I was going to say this weekend in my lesson at Riverside. You may want to take more than one day with each reflection. I hope they make some kind of sense and I hope they are of some help to you. Ok on with the circus ;o)

This week we're going to be looking at a sobering thing Jesus talked about quite a bit. He talked about it in different ways, using different metaphors and this week we'll be looking at something He called the narrow door. I think maybe the best way to get started would be for us to just read this entire passage of scripture and then we'll spend the rest of today (and the rest of the week) talking about it:

Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he went, always pressing on toward Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He replied, "Work hard to enter the narrow door to God's Kingdom, for many will try to enter but will fail. When the master of the house has locked the door, it will be too late. You will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Lord, open the door for us!' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' Then you will say, 'But we ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' And he will reply, 'I tell you, I don't know you or where you come from. Get away from me, all you who do evil.' "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, for you will see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God, but you will be thrown out. And people will come from all over the world- from east and west, north and south-to take their places in the Kingdom of God. And note this: Some who seem least important now will be the greatest then, and some who are the greatest now will be least important then."

Luke 13:22-30 (NLT)

See what I mean by sobering? I don't know about you but I just don't much like thinking about stuff like this. If you've attended Riverside for any length of time you may have noticed I don't much talk about the concept of hell. Why is that? Well it's not because I try to avoid uncomfortable subjects (ok that might be part of it). I think the main reason is because I don't really know exactly what to say about it. Jesus talked about it a lot but what did He mean when He talked about it? Sometimes He was referring to the location that was reserved for the devil and his angels where they would be locked up for all eternity. But sometimes- in fact often- He was talking about the human capacity for unleashing hell on this earth in our lives and in the lives of others. How do we know which He was talking about if He used the same language both times? Exactly.

Another thing you may have noticed if you've attended Riverside for any length of time is that I rarely make authoritative statements about how things are. About what you should do and what you shouldn't do. Or about how different aspects of the Christian faith should be worked out in your life. Why is that? It's because there are so many factors that impact what love should look like in our lives. And it's not just love. Forgiveness, seeking justice for others, giving to the poor and to the church, interpersonal relationships- these things are not cookie cutter, one-size-fits-all concepts that lend themselves to me telling you what this is supposed to look like in your life. If I tell you something is true then I'd better be darn sure that it's really true. Why? This is why:

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. James 3:1 (NLT)

Teachers will be held more accountable for the things that they teach than they will for the things they simply believe. I take that very seriously. And you should too. Maybe you're not a "teacher" at a church or a Christian school but any time you go online and make a declarative statement that "this is the way it is" you might be teaching whether you want to realize it or not. And if that's true then you'll be held more accountable for that declarative statement than you will be for your beliefs. So don't get stomping blindly into territory where angels fear to tread. I see people doing this all the time in the comments section of Facebook posts.

So yeah, I've avoided talking about hell because I'm really not sure what to say when it comes to "teaching". I believe the place exists but who goes there and what happens to them for how long? That starts to get a tad murky. Ok it gets VERY murky. Which is ironic because I grew up believing hell was the clearest doctrine in the entire Bible and that everybody agrees about it. But then I started researching and realized it's about as clear as mud. And everyone does not agree. They haven't since the first century. What's interesting is that in the first century and onward (until roughly the fourth century) Christians could disagree on the nature of hell and still consider the other one a brother or sister in Christ. But nowadays if you simply disagree with someone's view of hell they'll tell you that you're going to hell for not believing correctly about hell. Where does the Bible say that (I'll give you a hint, it doesn't, at least I've never seen that verse)?

But I knew that as I preached through the chronological story of Jesus' life eventually I'd have to address the concept of hell in one way or another and it only took me 202 stories into His life to get here. So buckle up buttercup (I'm saying that more to myself than to you at this point) because this week we're going to wade into what we know (and what we don't know) about hell. Sounds like fun, huh?

Tuesday Reflection: So what is the story that brings us to this cheery topic (we're focusing in on hell this week if you missed yesterday's memo)? It's Jesus talking about something He called the narrow door. He talks about this narrow door because someone asks Him a question that He doesn't find terribly interesting:

Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved? He replied, "Work hard to enter the narrow door to God's Kingdom, for many will try to enter but will fail." Luke 13:22-24 (NLT)

Jesus cracks me up. He almost never answers a direct question with a direct answer. He especially doesn't like answering questions like "how do I inherit eternal life?". And this question is adjacent to it. Will only a few be saved? Jesus is always vague about how many people will make it to Heaven. I think there's probably a lot of reasons for that but one of them is that it's not up to Him. CS Lewis called hell God's great tribute to human choice. He won't force anyone to enter the Kingdom of Heaven against their will. Why would anyone not choose Heaven over hell? We'll get to that in a bit.

But what's fascinating to me is that rather talk about how many (or few) will get in to Heaven Jesus wants to talk about how to get in if that's what you are aiming for. He tells us to enter by the narrow door. He also tells us that there will be people who try to go through

the narrow door but they will fail. Ok so let's talk about this narrow door. Why is it narrow in the first place? Couldn't God have made it as wide as He wanted?

No, He couldn't have. Why not? Because there are things that we hold onto with a death grip in this world that we could never bring with us into Heaven. They are things that can't be brought with us and if we try to bring them we will find the door is too narrow for us to fit through. You've heard people say "you can't take it with you", referring to money but that statement is true for a lot of other stuff we carry around as well. What kinds of things? Well things like pride, ego, selfishness and self righteousness just to name a few. Those things clash with Heaven.

It's not like God is some cosmic bouncer that's stands behind a rope at a popular club and makes arbitrary decisions about who gets in and who doesn't. We are the ones who make it impossible to enter through the narrow door when we refuse to let go of our pride and ego and all the rest. Now I feel like it's important to note at this point that eternal life isn't just about the afterlife. Eternal life is every bit as much about quality of life as it is length and God expects our eternal life to begin here and now on this side of eternity. But whether we're talking about what happens after our death or what happens now the door is the same one- it's the narrow door. You won't have the kind of life God dreams of for you while you hold on to pride and ego and selfishness and self righteousness. We have to let those go to enter Jesus' Kingdom no matter which side of death we happen to be on.

One time a guy came to ask Jesus a question. He is referred to as the rich, young ruler. This guy really hit the trifecta, didn't he? I mean about the only thing missing is good looking. That's the only thing that could've made what this guy has going on any better. Anyways, here's the question:

As Jesus was starting out on his way to Jerusalem, a man came running up to him, knelt down, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Mark 10:17 (NLT)

And what does Jesus tell this guy who seemingly has it all in this life? His answer stuns the poor kid:

You know the commandments: 'You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. You must not cheat anyone. Honor your father and mother.'" "Teacher," the man replied, "I've obeyed all these commandments since I was young." Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him. "There is still one thing you haven't done," he told him. "Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At this the man's face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions. Mark 10:19-21 (NLT)

What was this kid's problem? Was it that he had a lot of money and Jesus is saying that money is bad? That can't be it because Jesus had other disciples who were rich that He didn't tell to give everything they had away. So then what was the problem. The problem was what's in this kid's heart. When Jesus lists the commandments that must be followed to "inherit eternal life" He mentions every command in God's top ten list except for a few of them. What were the ones He didn't mention at first? The commands talking about idolatry and putting other "gods" before Yahweh. People are very creative and we have figured out

ways to make all kinds of things that are neutral in and off themselves into gods (or idols) in our lives. Money is one of the biggies. I think what Jesus is saying without actually saying it here is that this rich young ruler has an idolatry problem. He has made money his god and it's keeping him from walking through the narrow door. But rather than dropping the stuff that's getting in the way he just goes away sad. Maybe he blamed Jesus for keeping him out of the club. We'll never know. But what this kid missed. He could have had a front row seat to the greatest teaching and the most impressive miracles this world has every seen. And he could've been an eyewitness to the greatest miracle of all- the resurrection of Jesus.

Don't let anything keep you from walking through the narrow door folks. I know it's easy for me to say (and I struggle with the stuff I don't want to let go of every single day) but we could miss so much if we're not willing to let it go. So let's take a page out of Elsa's book (you know the girl from Frozen?) and let it go. If you do you won't have to worry about how you'll ever fit through the narrow door.

Wednesday Reflection: I know I promised on Monday that we'd be talking about hell this week but I've got to ease into it through the story that brought all of this up at this point- the story of the narrow door. So patience- we will get there but I can't guarantee you won't be disappointed when we do. So for today let's continue with our story. We learned yesterday that the door isn't narrow because God's stingy and wants to keep us out- in fact it's wide open and anyone can walk right through it in the God's Kingdom. But one thing that Jesus let's us know in this story is that one day that door will close:

When the master of the house has locked the door, it will be too late. You will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Lord, open the door for us!' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' Luke 13:25 (NLT)

So is this talking about what will happen when the end comes- either the end for us (our death) or the end of the world? Maybe? You have to keep in mind these are parables and Jesus is speaking in metaphors and riddles. We love to take the things in parables literally that bolster what we believe about something but we take figuratively anything that doesn't. People do it all the time. Want an example? In Luke chapter 15 Jesus tells 3 stories about 3 lost things- a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son. In the first two stories the owner searches high and low for what was lost and when the lost thing is found the owner puts it back with the things that never got lost in the first place. Calvinists who believe that God's grace is irresistible and that we really have no choice in whether we get saved or not point to these parables as proof that their argument is true.

Meanwhile, in the story of the lost of son the dad not only let's his son leave, he never goes looking for the son but waits patiently for his son to return. When he does the son is brought back into the family but according to the dad in the story his son was "lost but now is found, was dead but is not alive". Those who disagree with the Calvinist view of God (theologians call them Arminians) would point to this story as proof that we have free will and God will allow us to reject Him if that's our choice but He waits patiently for the day we might change our minds and return to Him at which point we will be welcomed home with the party to end all parties.

Three stories of lost thing that seem to make contradicting statements about whether we humans have free will to love or reject God. See what I mean about being careful when it comes to making a hard a fast doctrine from a metaphor found in a parable? We do the same thing with the parables about hell. We take every metaphor that might be referring to hell and take it completely literally. We make doctrines based on our literal interpretations of these metaphors and then condemn anyone who would dare disagree with our obviously impeccable conclusions- even to the point of saying "if you don't agree with my idea of hell then you're going to hell!"

Want to make things even murkier? Remember those three stories about lost things that seemed to contradict each other? What would you say if I told you that while they contradict one another in human logic, they don't in God's? Jesus does this all the time. He told us that first would be last and the last would be first. But that's impossible, isn't it? How can the first person also the last? They contradict one another. But not in God's logic. Jesus showed us exactly how to do it. He told us the greatest would be the servant of all and the servant of all would be called the greatest. Impossible we say. Not for Jesus. He showed us exactly how it's done. Things that seem impossible for us aren't impossible for God.

Remember that rich young ruler we talked about yesterday? The guy who went away sad when Jesus told him to drop the stuff that was preventing him from walking through the narrow door? Let's listen in as Jesus talks to the disciples who did drop everything and entered through that narrow door:

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!" This amazed them. But Jesus said again, "Dear children, it is very hard to enter the Kingdom of God. In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!" The disciples were astounded. "Then who in the world can be saved?" they asked. Jesus looked at them intently and said, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God."

Mark 10:23-27 (NLT)

Why were the disciples amazed at Jesus' words that it's hard for the rich to enter the Kingdom? Because they had been taught that the rich must be God's favorite people because look at how much He had blessed them. They had been told (probably by the rich priests and Pharisees) that wealth was a sign of God's favor. So when Jesus says it's harder for them than it is for anyone else to enter His Kingdom they were shocked. And Jesus tells them it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom. What did He mean by that because that sounds impossible.

There's an apocryphal story that is often told as gospel truth about a gate in the walls of Jerusalem called the Eye Of The Needle gate. According to this story (for which there is zero archaeological evidence but it's a great illustration even if it isn't true) if you wanted to bring a camel through that gate you had to completely unload everything on the camel's back because the gate was too low for a camel to walk through carrying anything. So you unloaded everything, lead the camel through then carried all your stuff through the gate and reloaded the camel before you could go on. Seems an awful lot like what we were talking

about yesterday with the narrow door that you can't walk through while loaded down with pride, ego, selfishness and self-righteousness, doesn't it?

It may seem impossible to us but it's not impossible for God. In fact, nothing's impossible for God. He can give all of us the grace we need to drop whatever needs to be dropped in order otherwise go through the narrow door. Just ask Him for help and you will find unlimited amounts of grace, mercy and infinite patience when we keep picking those things up over and over again as we go through our lives.

Thursday Reflection: I started to talk about how Jesus says one day the narrow door will close but I never really got around to it so let's pick that back up today shall we?

When the master of the house has locked the door, it will be too late. You will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Lord, open the door for us!' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' Then you will say, 'But we ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' And he will reply, 'I tell you, I don't know you or where you come from. Get away from me, all you who do evil.' "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, for you will see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God, but you will be thrown out. And people will come from all over the world—from east and west, north and south—to take their places in the Kingdom of God. And note this: Some who seem least important now will be the greatest then, and some who are the greatest now will be least important then." Luke 13:26-30 (NLT)

Ok so more bad news, right? Sounds like bad news. At least it's bad if we didn't go through the narrow door when we had the chance. Again it sounds like if we don't do that then we're going to hell, doesn't it? But remember what we talked about when it comes to taking the metaphors in Jesus' parables literally. I'm not saying you can never do that- I'm just saying you need to be aware of our propensity to take literally the metaphors that match up with our own way of thinking and rejecting the metaphors that seem to contradict our own way of thinking. I mean what do I know? Maybe Jesus is being literal here and He is talking about hell. But maybe not.

One thing I need to say before we go on is that if you don't agree with me on any of this, well, welcome to the club. I'm not sure I agree with myself half the time. As I have prepared to give this lesson there have been some pretty intense arguments about all of this and that's all happened inside my own head. Remember how I told you I don't really talk about hell because I'm not sure what I'd say? Well here we are. Depending on the day I have different ideas about what's literal and what's figurative. All that to say this- hell is a murky subject that has a huge spectrum of things that are believed about it.

For instance, there are those who believe in what theologians call universalism which is the belief that none of us are going to hell and that we're all going to be saved. Before you scoff too much at that idea let me tell you that there are some passages of scripture that seem to support that idea. That's one extreme end of the hell spectrum. The other end is that that there will be a TON of people going to hell and only a few saved. Before you scoff too hard at

that idea let me tell you, there are some passages of scripture that seem to support that belief. See what I mean about not knowing exactly what to think about hell? Anyways, there are those two extremes and then there's a wide variety of views that fall somewhere between those two extremes. Some of those views are closer to one side of the spectrum than the other and let me tell you there are a ton of different beliefs all along that spectrum.

But even if you do your research and decide that you know what the "right" answer is, well then you've got another huge spectrum where you have to decide another important question, what happens to the people that end up in hell? Because you may think there's only one answer to that question but again, let me tell you there are many conclusions that people have come to on that subject as well. For instance, there are the annihilationists who believe that hell's fires are eternal but the suffering of humans in those fires is not endless. They believe that when a human goes to hell their existence is snuffed out by the eternal flames. And before you scoff at that idea let me tell you, there are some passages of scripture that seem to support that conclusion. Others see hell as God's cosmic torture chamber where He sends all humans who didn't have the good sense to enter through the narrow door when they had the chance and before you scoff at that idea- well you get the picture right?

Then you've got people who believe that once you die your fate is sealed while there are those who believe that death is not the last chance you'll ever have to drop all of your pride, ego, selfishness and self-righteousness. Do you wonder who on earth wouldn't jump at the chance to drop all of that stuff and enter through the narrow door after death? CS Lewis would say lots of people.

CS Lewis was cagey about what he thought about hell. Maybe because he saw how confusing the whole thing is and wasn't sure what he thought about it himself. Or maybe it's because if he came out and said what he really thought he'd be fed to the fires by angry Christians before he had a chance to go to hell after his death (I'm not saying CS Lewis is in hell, ok? I was making a bad joke that we Christians have the really unfortunate habit of consigning to hell anyone who disagrees with our view of hell). I'm not sure but one thing I do know about him is he wrote a little book called *The Great Divorce* which is a sort of parable about the afterlife and heaven and hell. It's a really easy read (or listen if you like audiobooks) and will give you lots to chew on if this is a topic you'd like to dig into a bit more.

The concept of the book is basically that when you die your fate is not sealed. People who followed Jesus and had dropped their pride, ego, selfishness and self-righteousness go straight to heaven but people who didn't (including many who would've considered themselves to be Christians in this life but wouldn't drop the stuff they needed to in order to enter through the narrow door) don't go straight to hell- they go to a place he calls Grey Town. It's a place devoid of hope and love and joy but it's not the final destination. Every day there's a bus that leaves Grey Town and takes anyone who wants to go up to the outskirts of heaven. The residents of Grey Town have to be very careful because things in heaven are so much more real and substantial in heaven (even the outskirts) that the grass hurts their feet and if they were unlucky enough to have a leaf fall upon them from a tree they would be knocked to the ground.

When they get off the bus they are met by residents of heaven who come out to try to help guide these folks into heaven by teaching them about what they need to drop to go through the narrow door (not a metaphor Lewis uses but for our purposes I think it helps make things a bit clearer). In the story not many of the residents of Grey Town decide to enter heaven because they don't like what heaven stands for. One person notices someone that they despised on earth is a resident of heaven and he gets back on the bus to go back to grey town because he'd never be part of a club that allowed someone like that to be a member.

But for anyone who is willing to take on the humility of Jesus and drop everything that prevented them from entering through the narrow door they are welcomed into heaven and become permanent residents of the place. Lots of people poopoo this idea because of all the metaphors in the parables that make it sound like death seals our fate. There's also this passage many will point to:

It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment. Hebrews 9:27 (ESV)

I was always told this is proof that death seals our fate but it doesn't say when the judgment comes. Does it come right after our death? Maybe. Maybe not. I'm not sure. Do you see why I said I'm very careful about what I "teach" on this subject? If I'm going to teach you by telling you this-is-absolutely-how-it-is then I'd better be darn good and sure that something is-absolutely-how-it-is. And about this subject I'm just not absolutely-sure-it's-how-it-is. So I hem and I haw and I shrug and say to you, "do your research and see what you think about it all."

If you disagree with me that's fine. Better people than you have disagree with me- sometimes violently. Not to put you down or anything but my guess is most people would disagree with me on this and probably much more. But the more I do this job the less sure I become of everything with one exception- Jesus. Him I'm completely sure of. Through all of my ins and outs and ups and downs and the constant changing of my beliefs about things like hell and many other there has been one constant in my life. Jesus. He has never left me or forsaken me even though I've given Him lots of reasons to. But other than Him you won't find me dying on many hills and arguing the superiority of my position.

We'll finish up tomorrow talking about his super fun subject but for today maybe spend some time reflecting on what you believe about hell and then ask yourself, why in the hell do I believe that (sorry if that offended anyone but it made me smile ;o)

Friday Reflection: Ok so let's finish up our week talking more about... hell! Why not? Like I've said over and over again in this week's reflections the reason I don't talk much about hell is because I'm just not sure what I think the Bible is saying about it. Don't get me wrong- I've done a ton of research on the topic but the more I scratch below the surface of this topic the more shadowy it gets. So let's talk about what I do think we can know about this place called hell.

First I think it's pretty obvious that God didn't create it. If you read the opening page of the Bible you'll find a poem that describes how and why God created everything. At the end of each day we're told that God looked at what He had made and saw that it was "good". I know

that in our language the word "good" isn't great. It's just ok. But in the Bible there's no better adjective to describe something than good. And after the final day of creation we read this:

Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good! Genesis 1:31 (NLT)

I guess there's one way you can describe something as better than "good" in the Bible and that's by putting the qualifier "very" in front of it. Basically God is pronouncing His creation as perfection. One thing you won't find in the story of creation is when God created hell. If He did I don't know how He could look down and pronounce everything as "very good". So then where did hell come from?

My guess (and that's all this is- a guess because we're not told in the Bible where hell came from) is that hell was created either when the devil and his angels rebelled against God or when Adam & Eve brought sin into the world. If I had to pick one I'm not sure which one makes the most sense to me. They're both great candidates. If it happened when Adam & Eve brought sin into the world it would make sense because their rebellion (which isn't all that different from what the devil's rebellion was all about when you think about it) short circuited every relationship they had and basically shattered the world. I think it's quite possible that it was at that moment that hell was made. It doesn't really matter but we humans like to know stuff so that's my guess.

But no matter when it was created the fact of the matter is, the Bible says it exists. Jesus talks about it and so do most of the rest of the writers of the New Testament. But God doesn't want us to have to ever have to go there. And He certainly doesn't want us bringing hell here. Because one thing we can know about hell- we humans are really good at unleashing it on this earth. Whether we are directly responsible for it's existence is debatable- our ability to release it into our own lives or the lives of others is not:

And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is full of wickedness, and poisons every part of the body. And the tongue is set on fire by hell itself and can turn our whole lives into a blazing flame of destruction and disaster. James 3:6 (TLB)

We are professionals when it comes to unleashing hell on this earth. We do it with our words. We do it with our actions. It does untold harm- like a forest fire. Jesus didn't only come to this earth so we wouldn't ever have to "go to hell"- He also came to get the hell out of us:

Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous... So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 5:18-21 (NLT)

The only way to get the hell out of us as it turns out is by getting Jesus into us. Obviously we all continue to sin and we all will continue to unleash hell in our lives and in the lives of others but the more we are able to walk with Jesus the less of that kind of thing we'll do. Once when Jesus was teaching He said this:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10 (NIV)

We have a choice- we listen to the thief who wants to destroy us and those we care about or we listen to the voice of the Shepherd. The more we listen to the voice of the Shepherd the less hell we will unleash onto this earth. The more we listen to the thief- well you get the picture.

The only other thing I think we can know about hell is that it's a place where the devil and his angels (think demons here) will spend eternity:

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Matthew 25:41 (ESV)

And that's about all I'm confident of. What will I say if you ask me what happens to all the humans who don't listen to the Shepherd? It depends on what day it is and how I'm feeling. I'm kind of kidding but not that much. This concept has me as stumped as any concept in the Bible and it's not just the seemingly contradictory things that the Bible says about the subject. A lot of my confusing lies in my understanding of who God is. I just can't see Him as a cosmic torturer who casts His creations into the eternal fire where we will be tormented forever- even though there are some passages of scripture that seems to suggest that. I realize I could be wrong about that- but I REALLY hope I'm not. And frankly I don't think I am. But again, what do I know?

Thank God we're not saved by our beliefs about hell and the eternal destiny of every human that has ever lived. We are not saved by any of our beliefs other than our belief in Jesus:

We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done. Romans 3:22 (NLT)

That's why I spend the vast majority of my preaching trying to show people how amazing Jesus is rather than trying to convince them to agree with my way of interpreting this incredibly complicated and often confusing book that we call the Bible. Because if I can get you to trust in Him then everything else will work itself out.

In my view our understanding of hell must not be that important to God or He would have made it much easier to get a clear picture of what it is, who goes there and what happens to them. But if this is something you'd like to grapple with some more I will suggest a couple of resources. Obviously I don't need to suggest any books on the traditional view of hell in western Christianity (and most of our beliefs in western Christianity come more from a few authors from the middle ages like Milton and Dante and even Bunyan [John- not Paul who had a big blue ox but it confused me a lot at first- maybe John was Paul's brother?]) so let me suggest a couple of resources that won't answer the question for you but will give you lots of questions to ponder when it comes to this place called hell.

The first one is a book by Rob Bell called Love Wins. It probably came out 15 or 20 years ago and when it did it was incredibly controversial. Conservative pastors were outraged and I kept hearing people say that Rob Bell (who I always loved to listen to) didn't believe in hell.

So I got myself a copy to read for myself. I don't mind at all reading books I disagree with. How else will I be able to grapple with questions and understand why I believe what I believe? And after reading Love Wins I realized he never gave any answers to the questions he was asking about hell. He simply laid out a ton of really thought provoking questions and left the reader to grapple with the answers on their own. Basically he questioned just how simple and settled the doctrine of hell really is by pointing out things that seemed to be inconsistent that the Bible says about this place. Like how can hell be a place of eternal darkness (which the Bible does over and over) and a place where the flame never dies? How can you have fire and darkness in the same place? Was Jesus being metaphorical and we took it as literal? Like Rob Bell I'll leave you to ponder that one on your own.

The second book I mentioned earlier in the week- it's The Great Divorce by CS Lewis. You've got to put on your detectives hat to try to untangle what Lewis really thinks about hell but again, it will give you a place to stand as you engage this topic.

And the last resource I would suggest is actually a movie that you'll find on Amazon Prime called Hell & Mr. Fudge. I know- strange title. It's about a preacher named Edward Fudge who was part of the same denomination I grew up in. He never set out to become a controversial figure in our churches because of his views on hell but in Bible college he was assigned the debate topic of hell in one of his classes. He lost the coin flip and had to take the position that hell didn't exist. As he dug into the topic he realized that while he could never successfully prove that hell doesn't exist, he could cause quite a bit of doubt over our traditional views of the place. And because he basically won that debate he had to participate in for his class he basically got blacklisted among the churches of Christ. Eventually he wrote a book called The Fire That Consumes and ended up arguing for an annihilationist view of hell.

I know this must have been a hell of a week for you if you read all of these reflections. I know it was for me. I really don't like talking about this subject but since Jesus talked about it I don't feel like there's really another choice since we are setting out to discuss everything Jesus ever taught about. So here it is. My views (if you can call them that) on hell. And if you don't agree with me, that's ok. I just hope we can still be friends even if my views (or lack thereof) might differ from yours. Because remember- it's not our views on hell that save us, it's our belief in Jesus who came to this world and gave His life so we would never have to worry about going there. We'd only have to worry about talking about it ;o)

Jesus is awesome. Thank you Lord.