

The Severity of Hell - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2011/5/12 14:17

Charles Spurgeon once advised fellow-preachers, "Shun all views of future punishment that would make it appear less terrible." Yet another timely word from Spurgeon—efforts to extinguish the flames of hell abound in our day, just as they did in his.

As you listen to popular views about hell, you can test what you hear with a few biblically-discerning questions:

Does this view of hell diminish the threat of God's judgment?

Does this teaching soften the urgency of repentance?

Is this offering the sinner any hope of salvation beyond this life?

Modern views of hell won't survive the test of biblical fidelity. They'll allow the sinner to feel more comfortable and complacent by defanging God, making Him appear less severe.

Challenges to the doctrine of hell start out by questioning what the Bible clearly says, but they don't end there. Wayne Grudem, recognizing the trend to make hell appear more bearable, noticed a tragic pattern:

The doctrine of eternal conscious punishment...tends to be one of the first doctrines given up by people who are moving away from a commitment to the Bible as absolutely truthful. Among liberal theologians who do not accept the absolute truthfulness of the Bible, there is probably no one today who believes in the doctrine of eternal conscious punishment. (Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology)

Two of the more prominent campaigns against hell are attacks against its eternality and severity. Travis gave us some help in understanding the eternality of hell; now let's take a look at hell's severity.

Will hell really be that bad?

Whenever Jesus described hell, He was never flippant or dismissive. He used vivid, terrifying terms to describe the final destination of sinners, shocking and scaring His audiences with frighteningly graphic metaphors. Hell is a place so bad that you should be willing to cut off sensitive, irreplaceable parts of your body to avoid it (Mt. 5:29-30); even martyrdom would be worth avoiding the torment of hell (Matt. 10:28). He always presented hell as a horrific place of intolerable suffering.

His descriptions are consistent with other biblical writers. Daniel referred to hell as a place of shame and everlasting contempt (Dan. 12:2). Paul called it a place of endless destruction and punishment (2 Thess. 1:5-10). Jude called hell a place of eternal fire and darkness (Jude 7). The Apostle John described hell as a place where sinners suffer everlasting torment, with no rest day or night (Rev. 14:9-11).

Taken together, all those descriptions of hell communicate pain, fear, loss, anger, separation, and hopelessness. It's utter agony, eternal torment.

Agony and Torment

The New Testament describes hell as a place of unimaginable torment. Biblical writers help us picture scenes of unspeakable horror, and most of the time they're merely quoting what Jesus said about hell:

weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12)

spiritual and bodily destruction (Mt. 10:28)

fiery furnaces (Matt. 13:42, 50)

outer darkness (Matt. 22:13)

unquenchable fires (Mark 9:48-49)

endless torments (Luke 16:23-24)

John Calvin, commenting on those descriptions, wrote, "By such expressions, the Holy Spirit certainly intended to conform all our senses with dread." Calvin understood the Bible's appeal to our senses. When you read about hell in Scripture, you can almost hear the agonizing wails, smell the smoke and burning sulfur, see the flames from the lake of fire, and feel the seething anger of the wicked as they gnash their teeth at the Righteous Judge.

Jesus used pictures and metaphors to help us understand the horror of hell. Darkness represents loneliness, insecurity, the sense of being lost and disoriented; fire represents the excruciating pain of burning; and a lake of fire represents the sense of drowning, suffocating, taking the burning sulfur internally. These vivid pictures of hell's environment should provoke a reasonable sense of fear in a normal, thinking person. No one can come away with the idea that hell is a tolerable place to spend eternity.

Abandonment

While it's true that hell is a place of untold physical pain and suffering (fire, scorching, being cut to pieces), I think we often overlook the mental agony of being completely forsaken—abandoned for all eternity. After all, the most chilling cry from our Lord as He suffered God's wrath on the cross stemmed not from physical pain, but from being forsaken by the Father. Jesus cried out, "My God, My God, Why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46).

John MacArthur explained the significance of God forsaking the Son in relation to hell: "This is a reminder to all sinners that while hell is the full fury of God's personal punishment presence, He will never be there to comfort. He will never be there to show sympathy. He will never bring relief. It is both the punishment of God and the absence of comfort. That's hell—punishment without relief ("The King Crucified: Consummation at Calvary"). As the Puritan Thomas Vincent put it, "Not only will the unbeliever be in hell, but hell will be in him too."

Imprisonment

The New Testament frequently presents hell as a prison—a place of eternal confinement (Mt. 22:13; Jude 13; 2 Pet. 2:9). It's impossible to understand first-century prison conditions by looking at American prisons today where accommodations include cable television, three square meals, educational opportunities, outdoor exercise, and toilet/shower facilities. In many of the world's jails throughout history, jailors didn't just treat prisoners like criminals, but rather as sub-humans, as animals.

But even the worst of earthly prison conditions serve as weak analogies to the eternal dungeon of God's hell. God will offer nothing to comfort or relieve his agony—ever. In hell, sinners will forever be hopeless, helpless, and powerless. God casts them into hell for one reason—punishment (2 Thess. 1:9).

Look at the Cross

If you want an inside glimpse of the agonies of hell, look at the Savior in Gethsemane as He anticipated the cross. See the bloody drops of sweat falling from his body as He faced the reality of absorbing His Father's eternal wrath. Hear His agonizing screams from the cross as His Father—for the first and last time—abandoned His sin-bearing Son. Feel His loneliness as He faced those agonies alone.

Hell is a place where God's full wrath and fury will be poured out eternally on sinners. Possessing in Himself the essence and omniscience of deity, Christ knew what He spoke of. And as our sin-bearing substitute, He anticipated the torments of hell and finally experienced the full outpouring of divine wrath for all those who believe.

Scripture is abundantly clear about the doctrine of hell. Nothing good can come from advocating a view of hell that makes it out to be anything less than a hopeless, agonizing, eternal separation from the good and gracious presence of God. If you reject, diminish, or neglect the doctrine of hell, you undermine the gravity of our sin in contrast to the holiness of God. But armed with accurate teaching on hell, you help the sinner understand why he must flee from the wrath of God to the mercy of Jesus Christ.

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