



Articles and Sermons :: WHY HELL is INTEGRAL to THE GOSPEL by Greg Gilbert

WHY HELL is INTEGRAL to THE GOSPEL by Greg Gilbert - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2011/7/15 11:58

For some, the horror of the Christian doctrine of hell—that it is a place of eternal, conscious torment where God's enemies are punished—has led them not just to avert their eyes and minds, but to deny it entirely. "Surely," they say, "hell is a fictional construct used to oppress people with fear; a God of love would never allow such a place to really exist." There's an emotional power to this argument, to be sure. No one, certainly no Christian, likes the idea of hell.

At the same time, this doctrine isn't just drapery on the side of the Christian worldview, something with no relevance to the structure of the faith itself. Nor is the doctrine of hell an embarrassing, unnecessary, primitive wart that we believe just because we're told we have to.

On the contrary, the doctrine and reality of hell actually throws the glory of the gospel into sharp relief for us. It helps us to understand just how great God really is, how sinfully wretched we really are, and how unutterably amazing it is that he would show us grace at all. Moreover, the reality of hell—if we don't push it out of our minds—will focus us, above all, on the task of proclaiming the gospel to those who are in danger of spending eternity there.

With that in mind, here are five biblical statements about hell which, taken as a whole, demonstrate why hell is integral to the gospel.

WHY HELL is INTEGRAL to THE GOSPEL

1. Scripture teaches that there is a real place called hell. I won't belabor this point. Others have made this case with crystal clarity. Suffice it to say that medieval bishops didn't invent the doctrine of hell as a way to scare the serfs; they got it from the apostles. And the apostles didn't invent it to scare the pagans; they got it from Jesus... At the most basic level, therefore, if we claim to be Christians and to believe that the Bible is the word of God, we have to recognize that the Bible teaches the reality of hell. But there's more.

2. Hell shows us how heinous our sin really is. Have you ever heard someone make the argument that no human sin could possibly deserve eternal torment in hell? It's an interesting argument, one that reveals a lot about the human heart. Why is it that when people think about hell, they always conclude that God must be at fault and not themselves? You can see how the doctrine reveals our hearts: when we consider our own sin, our first inclination is always to minimize it, to protest that it's not that bad and that God is wrong to say it deserves punishment.

The reality of hell stands as a massive refutation of that self-justification. Non-Christians will always see the horrors of hell as an indictment of God, but as Christians who know God to be

perfectly just and righteous, we must understand that the horrors of hell are actually an indictment of us. We may want to minimize our sin, or excuse it, or try to argue our consciences down. But the fact that God has declared that we deserve eternal torment for those sins should remind us that they are not small at all. They are enormously evil.

3. Hell shows us how immovably and unimpeachably just God really is. People have been tempted throughout history to think of God as a corrupt judge, one who sets aside the demands of justice simply because he likes the defendant. "We are all God's children," the argument goes. "How could God hand down such a horrible sentence on some of his children?" The answer to that question is simple: God is not a corrupt judge. He is an absolutely just and righteous one.

Over and over the Bible makes this point. When God reveals himself to Moses, he declares himself to be compassionate and loving, but he also says, "Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished." The Psalms declare that "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne." What an amazing statement! If God is to continue being God, he cannot simply set justice aside and sweep sin under the rug. He must deal with it—decisively and with exacting justice. When God finally judges, not one sin will receive more punishment than it deserves...

The Bible tells us that on that day, when God sentences his enemies to hell, the whole universe will recognize and acknowledge that what he has decided is unimpeachably just and right. Isaiah 5 makes this point with bracing clarity:

"Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opens its mouth without measure." It's a grotesque image, the grave widening its mouth to swallow the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And yet by this means, Isaiah declares, "The Lord of Hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness." Similarly, Romans 9:22 tells us that by the torments of hell, God will "show his wrath and make his power known," so that he might "make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy."

We may not understand it fully now, but one day hell itself will declare God's glory. It will—even in its horror—testify together with the psalmist, "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne."

4. Hell shows us how horrific the cross really was, and how great God's grace really is. Romans 3 tells us that God put forth Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement "to demonstrate his justice." He did this "because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished."

Why did Jesus have to die on the cross? It was because that was the only way God could righteously not send every one of us to hell. Jesus had to take what was due to us, and that means he had to endure the equivalent of hell as he hung on the cross. That doesn't mean that Jesus actually went to hell. But it does mean that the nails and the thorns were only the beginning of Jesus' suffering. The true height of his suffering came when God poured out his wrath on Jesus. When the darkness fell, that wasn't just God covering the suffering of his Son, as some have said. That was

the darkness of the curse, of God's wrath. It was the darkness of hell, and in that moment Jesus was enduring its full fury—the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.

When you understand the cross in that light, you begin to understand better just how magnificent God's grace to you is, if you are a Christian. The mission of redemption that Jesus undertook involved a commitment to endure God's wrath in your place, to take the hell that you deserve. What an amazing display of love and mercy that is! Yet you will only see and understand this display of love clearly when you understand, accept, and shudder at the horror of hell.

5. Hell focuses our minds on the task of proclaiming the gospel. If hell is real, and if people are truly in danger of spending eternity there, then there is no more urgent and important task than doing precisely what Jesus told his apostles to do before he ascended to heaven—proclaim to the world the good news that forgiveness of sins is offered through Jesus Christ!

I think John Piper got it exactly right in a Gospel Coalition interview: "It's very hard to give up on the gospel if you believe there is hell, that after this life, there is an endless suffering for those who did not believe in the gospel." There are all kinds of good things that Christians can do—and in fact should do! But if hell is real, it is worth keeping in mind—no, it is imperative that we keep in mind—that the one thing that Christians can do that no one else in the world is ever going to do is to tell people how they can be forgiven of their sin, how they can avoid spending an eternity in hell.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the doctrine of hell is horrible. The doctrine is horrible because the reality is horrible. But that's not a reason to avert our eyes and ignore it, much less to reject it. There are those who think that, by rejecting or at least ignoring the doctrine in their preaching, they are making God more glorious and more loving. Far from it! What they are really doing is unwittingly stealing glory from the Savior Jesus Christ, as if what he saved us from was... well, not so bad after all. In fact, the horrific nature of what we have been saved from only intensifies the glory of what we have been saved to. Not only so, but as we see ever more clearly the horror of hell, we look with ever more love, ever more gratitude, and ever greater worship to the One who endured that hell for us and saved us.