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

Charles Spurgeon once advised fellow-preachers, Â“Shun all views of future punishment that would make it appear less terrible.Â” Yet another timely word from SpurgeonÂ—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 GodÂ’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 wonÂ’t survive the test of biblical fidelity. TheyÂ’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 donÂ’t end there. Wayne Grudem, recognizing the trend to make hell appear more bearable, noticed a tragic pattern:

The doctrine of eternal conscious punishmentÂ…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 ab solute truthfulness of the Bible, there is probably no one today who believes in the doctrine of eternal conscious punishm ent. (Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology)

Two of the more prominent campaigns against hell are attacks against its eternality and severity. Travis gave us some h elp in understanding the eternality of hell; now letÂ’s take a look at hellÂ’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 t hat you should be willing to cut off sensitive, irreplaceable parts of your body to avoid it (Mt. 5:29-30); even martyrdom w ould be worth avoiding the torment of hell (Matt. 10:28). He always presented hell as a horrific place of intolerable sufferi ng.

His descriptions are consistent with other biblical writers. Daniel referred to hell as a place of shame and everlasting con tempt (Dan. 12:2). Paul called it a place of endless destruction and punishment (2 Thess. 1:5-10). Jude called hell a plac e of eternal fire and darkness (Jude 7). The Apostle John described hell as a place where sinners suffer everlasting torm ent, 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 utte r agony, eternal torment.

Agony and Torment

The New Testament describes hell as a place of unimaginable torment. Biblical writers help us picture scenes of unspea kable horror, and most of the time theyÂ’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 confo und all our senses with dread.Â" Calvin understood the BibleÂ's appeal to our senses. When you read about hell in Scri pture, 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 hellÂ's environment should pr ovoke a reasonable sense of fear in a normal, thinking person. No one can come away with the idea that hell is a tolerab le place to spend eternity.

Abandonment

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

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

Imprisonment

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

But even the worst of earthly prison conditions serve as weak analogies to the eternal dungeon of GodÂ's hell. God will offer nothing to comfort or relieve his agonyÂ—ever. In hell, sinners will forever be hopeless, helpless, and powerless. G od casts them into hell for one reasonÂ—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 t he bloody drops of sweat falling from his body as He faced the reality of absorbing His FatherÂ's eternal wrath. Hear His agonizing screams from the cross as His FatherÂ—for the first and last timeÂ—abandoned His sin-bearing Son. Feel Hi s loneliness as He faced those agonies alone.

Hell is a place where GodÂ's full wrath and fury will be poured out eternally on sinners. Possessing in Himself the essen ce and omniscience of deity, Christ knew what He spoke of. And as our sin-bearing substitute, He anticipated the torme nts 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 make s it out to be anything less than a hopeless, agonizing, eternal separation from the good and gracious presence of God. I f you reject, diminish, or neglect the doctrine of hell, you undermine the gravity of our sin in contrast to the holiness of G od. 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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