

Rethinking Our View of Hell

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The first known Jewish reference to the idea that hell is a place of eternal conscious torment is found in the Apocryphal Book of Judith written years after the completion of the Old Testament. Arising out of Jewish nationalism, what is described here is a place prepared for the heathen (the Gentiles) where they will weep and feel their pain forever (Judith 16:17). This represented the first known departure from hundreds of years of biblical thought that said God will punish the wicked and completely remove or destroy them. Little would one have suspected that this short innovative reference in a little known fictional and non-canonical book would later become the traditional view of orthodox Christianity, but that is in fact what has happened. In discipling ministries over the last 10-15 years there is one lesson we have learned: traditional views should not be treated as sacred. Our traditional view of the church, of the women's role, of relationships, of elders and evangelists, not to mention baptism and conversion along with many other subjects have been in need of revision. What is traditional is not necessarily what is biblical. Fresh study is always in order. And so it is with the topic of the punishment of those that know not God. There are strong traditions in conservative circles about hell and eternal punishment, but when was the last time we revisited those to see what the Bible really says? Do these traditions represent biblical thinking or perhaps the thinking of the medieval church.

One may ask why it is important to delve into such matters. Doesn't it distract from getting on with seeking the lost? Why does it matter that much just exactly what Scripture says about this topic? Will information in this area really change the way we think or live? Just why should we study this out? If for no other reason, because it is a significant biblical topic. It

is talked about by David, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, Paul, and other men who spoke for God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. But basically in any area, truth is always better than error. Truth is always "sound" doctrine, the Greek word for "sound" being the word from which we get the word hygienic or healthy. In other words, whenever we know the truth about something, it is always healthier for us than error. A false view of eternal punishment will in some way hurt the church just as dozens of false ideas have hurt it in the past. Even though we can't always see it when we are holding to a false idea, that idea does damage to the efforts to change people's lives and take the gospel around the world. The truth of God is always more powerful and more productive than man's ideas and if our traditional view of divine punishment has been wrong we and others will benefit from a more biblical view.¹

Hell is Real

As we approach this topic, let us settle quickly any misconception about where this study might be leading. There will be no suggestion here that hell does not exist or that it is just a metaphor that we no longer need in modern times. In the New Testament no one spoke of hell more often than Jesus. In fact most of the biblical material that we have on the subject came from him, and he is the absolute authority. Jesus introduced the issue early on in his ministry, saying in the Sermon on the Mount that it is better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell (Matthew 5:29-30). Later he would say, "Do

¹ In a fairly recent book, *The Fire that Consumes*, (Providential Press, P.O. Box 218026, Houston, TX 77218), author Edward Fudge reexamines the idea of eternal punishment and some of what is said here is treated much more thoroughly in his book.

not be afraid of those who kill the body and cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28). We will return later to important implications of this text, but it plainly shows that Jesus took the idea of hell seriously, and used its reality to warn men of the perils of unrighteous living. We will not here list all the many references to hell in Jesus' teaching but they can be verified quickly through the use of a concordance. Jesus message was primarily "good news" but there are dire consequences of rejecting God's love and it was these that Jesus had in mind whenever he spoke of hell. His disciples in their subsequent preaching and writing would seldom ever use the word, but they still spoke clearly of the judgment of God on the unbelievers.

But What Is Hell?

But let us come quickly to the point of this study. The question we are facing is not the existence of hell. That is settled quickly by Jesus. He did not use mythical places or fairy tale ideas to scare people. He spoke of reality. The question we face here is: what is the nature of hell? What is it like to be thrown there? The traditional idea in conservative religious circles for many years has been that it is a place of conscious and never ending torment. It is like being in a burning building and experiencing the heat and the pain of searing flesh hour after hour, day after day, forever and ever. Obviously, if there was nothing in the Bible that sounded like such a thing it is unlikely, although not impossible, that religious men would have ever come up with such an idea. The truth is that there are a few texts that taken alone might lead to that conclusion, but unfortunately some of the more plain and more literal statements of Scripture on this subject are usually ignored because of our bias to the traditional idea. We will look first at these texts before returning to some of those used to support the traditional view.

Destruction Not Torture

As quoted above, Jesus tells us in Matthew 10:28 to not fear the one who can kill

the body, but to fear the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell. Essentially, hell is a place of destruction. It is a place where both the body and soul of man is destroyed. This will come as shock to some, but the New Testament does not teach the immortality of the soul (that is that the soul of man is inherently immortal and will continue to live in some form even after death and judgment). Such is an idea that was popularized by Plato and other Greek philosophers who believed the soul had a prior existence, temporarily passed through the earthly body, and then continued to exist after the death of the body. The New Testament promises immortality for the souls of those who pursue it through faithfulness to God (Romans 2:7), and it is equated with the life that only Jesus Christ can give (2 Timothy 1:10). In I Corinthians 15 Paul has no thought at all about lost men and women having their perishable bodies transformed into imperishable ones. This happens to the saved, and to the saved alone. The only mortals who are clothed with immortality are those who find the victory in Jesus Christ as Lord. This is the overriding message of all clear passages that speak of immortality. It simply is not a biblical idea to speak of man's immortal soul. It is not a biblical idea but a Greek one to say, "all of us will spend eternity somewhere" as if immortality is inherent. It is not at all inherent in men. It is a gift of God to those who obey the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In this world, all men have been given a body and a soul. The acceptance of God's grace and the adoption into his family will lead to receiving the gift of eternal life and immortality.

The perishable body will become imperishable; the mortal soul will become immortal (I Cor. 15:54). But for those who go their own way, there will be wrath and anger, trouble and distress, but not eternal life (any kind) and not immortality (any kind) (Romans 2:7-9). That is never stated as a consequence of sin and unbelief.

Rather DESTRUCTION is the consequence of unrighteousness. And that is exactly what Jesus says in Matthew 10:28: "Fear him who is able to **destroy** both body and soul in hell." For those who know not God there will be no imperishable

body but rather destruction of the body. There will be no immortal soul but rather destruction of the soul in hell. Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called on people to enter the narrow way which would lead to LIFE rather than taking the broad way which leads to DESTRUCTION. Those who go the broad way are not given immortality and imperishability in order that they might suffer torment throughout eternity. No, the lost are never given immortality; they are destroyed. And we can be sure that when God destroys something, he does it thoroughly and completely. When Paul says in I Cor. 15:26 that the last enemy to be destroyed is death, he means that Jesus Christ will eliminate death. He will deal it such a blow that it will cease to be. "Destroy" here does not mean to put into a different state. It means to annihilate. Jesus will annihilate death. And so we should understand the word "destroy" in Matthew 10. The body and soul of man will be annihilated in hell. And so hell is a place, Jesus says, where body and soul are destroyed, and it is better to give up something in this life that your flesh would like to hold on to rather than be thrown into hell where your loss is total.

Hell is a reality and a place that brings total destruction to a life that had so much potential. It is an incredible tragedy. When we hear of some random act of violence that takes the life of a young person full of promise and talent, we grieve over the loss of what might have been. We do not have to envision that person in a torturous never-ending afterlife to experience a sense of tragedy. The loss of the potential good is tragedy enough. Such is the real tragedy of hell. Man, created in the image of God, and destined for an incredible life with him, **LOSES IT ALL!** His whole person is destroyed because of his rejection of God.

The Wages of Sin is Death

This view of hell is strongly supported by an examination of Paul's letters. Paul himself, while a Pharisaic Jew who would have been accustomed to the term, never once uses the word hell in his writings or in any speech in Acts. But he did speak without hesitation of the

judgment to come for those who do not repent and do not accept God's grace. There will most definitely be a day of God's wrath (Rom. 2:5) along with a day of redemption (Eph.4:30).

*"This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They will be punished with **everlasting destruction** and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed."*

2 Thess. 1:7b-10a

In this passage Paul teaches the reality of God's judgment and the reality of punishment for the unsaved, but he describes that punishment as **EVERLASTING DESTRUCTION**— a destruction so complete and irreversible that there will no possible recovery for those who experience it. Such destruction comes because the unsaved are "shut out from the presence of the Lord." For Paul every man's future will either be life or death. Either he will be with the Lord forever (1 Thess. 4:17) or he will be shut out from the presence of the Lord. God is the sustainer of life and apart from him there is no life and immortality, but only death. This is why Paul will say that "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). The end result of sin is death, Paul says. Because of our efforts to hold to an on-going afterlife of the lost, we often add "Now death means separation and this is a spiritual death or a separation from God. It doesn't mean you won't exist" but Paul never says anything to qualify what he means by death. There is nothing to cause us to think it means unending conscious torment. Instead there is in Paul the same language we find in Jesus. The unrighteous will be **DESTROYED** by God and the redeemed will be saved by him (Phil. 1:28). Those who sow to please the flesh will be **DESTROYED** and those who sow to please the Spirit will reap eternal life (Gal. 6:8). Those who live as enemies of the cross have **DESTRUCTION** as their destiny but those who

have their citizenship in heaven will see their lowly bodies transformed to be like Jesus glorious body (Phil. 3:19-21). The contrast is always between destruction and life, not between eternal agonizing life and eternal blissful life. There is not a hint in Paul's writings of a never ending torment for the lost.

But What About the Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth?

To say that hell is a place where ultimately man is destroyed is not to say that there is no consciousness of the loss that is about to happen. Jesus spoke on at least six different occasions of the "weeping and gnashing of teeth" that would be experienced by those who do not inherit the Kingdom of God (Matthew 8:11-12, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30). Sometimes it is in connection with being thrown into the fiery furnace and sometimes in connection with being thrown into the darkness—both expressions used to describe the destiny of those who don't enter the Kingdom. (Since darkness and fire are physical opposites, it raises questions about the literalness of these images, but that is another question.) The important thing is that in each of these passages the unsaved are pictured as being separated from the saved and as realizing that something awful is befalling them. Weeping most often has to do with the terror or desperation one feels as he considers an immense loss that has occurred or is about to occur. Gnashing of teeth is most often used in the Bible to describe a reaction of anger. As Edward Fudge suggests, "The first reflects the terror of the doomed as they begin to truly realize that God has thrown them out as worthless and as they anticipate the execution of His sentence. The second seems to express the bitter rage and acrimony they feel toward God, who sentenced them, and toward the redeemed, who will be forever blessed" (p. 172). The reason for these terms may not be something we can determine, but it is plain that Jesus is teaching that those who fail to enter the Kingdom of God will be conscious of their grievous error and will suffer as a result of their knowledge. This is the

punishment of those who have refused God's love.²

However, it is important to add that there is nothing in any of these passages to suggest that the weeping and gnashing of teeth goes on forever. Jesus says it will happen, but he does not say that it happens without end. That is something that has been read into these passages as a result of a bias in favor of the traditional view of hell.

But What About the Worm that Doesn't Die?

In my early days of commitment to Jesus, I was most impressed with a particular evangelist whose preaching brought many public responses with dramatic sermons including one called, "Hell and Who's Going There." Of all the texts he used in that sermon none etched itself into my mind more than the one from Mark 9:47-48. There Jesus said, "And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'" The evangelist would say, "If we could open the window of hell for just a moment, this is what we would hear," and then he would act out the opening of the window and let out a blood curdling scream. Then he would become one of the worms that was writhing in pain but never dying and the implication was that we would be just like the worm. Such tactics were useful in getting many to come down the aisle at the end of the sermon, but it was not good use of the text.

² 2 Peter 2:20-21 would indicate that the suffering here described will be even more severe and intense for those who have once known God but have turned back to the world. In Luke 12:47-48 in his conclusion to a parable Jesus talks about those who will be "beaten with many blows" and those who will be "beaten with few blows," indicating that the suffering for some will be worse than others. It is important to note in this passage that the "blows" one receives are not determined by the heinousness of one's sins but by what one did with the truth he had been given.

The statement about the worm is a quotation from Isaiah 66:24 which in full reads like this:

"And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind."

First, of all this passage is part of a highly figurative closing of Isaiah's prophecy in which he describes the coming of God's wrath, the destruction of the wicked, and the endurance of the righteous forever. In the verse just quoted the righteous or the saved go out and look at the dead bodies of those now disgraced people who rebelled against God. The worms in question are those that feed on dead bodies. They are not writhing in pain but are inflicting destruction. As Fudge puts it, "These discarded corpses are fit only for the worms and fire." And as he also points out, the righteous here are viewing not the misery of the wicked but their destruction" (pp.113, 114). The point here is that the worms and the fire don't stop. They continue their work of devouring and consuming until the destruction of the wicked is complete. Again, there is nothing in Jesus' statement and certainly nothing in the passage he quotes from Isaiah to indicate that the people in question remain conscious and continue to suffer from the effects of the worm or the fire. (Taking a very literal view, it is the worm that doesn't die not the people.) Instead the emphasis is on how final and irreversible the judgment of God will be. For these people, life is over and hope is gone. They have come to a disgraceful end because they refused to listen to God's call. The contrast between a careful interpretation of this passage and the popular interpretation of the response conscious evangelists of the past is remarkable. The latter missed the whole point, but it sure did preach!

Lazarus and the Rich Man

If the things presented so far are making sense, there may be at least one final hurdle that seems difficult to get over in moving away from the traditional view of hell and that is the story of Lazarus and the rich man found in Luke

16:19-31. Here we have the story of a man who lived in luxury and a poor man who ate the scraps from his table. They both died and the rich man was in "hell" (NIV) (actually Hades, not Ghenna) and the poor man was at Abraham's side (apparently in heaven, although not stated). The rich man looks up and sees Lazarus and asks Abraham to send him with just a drop of water to help relieve the agony of the fire he is in. Abraham comments on the reversal of the earthly fortunes and then tells the man that there is a great chasm fixed so that no one can go from one state to the other. The man then asks Abraham to send someone to warn his brothers who are still on earth so they won't come "to this place of torment."

Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them." "No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Luke

16:29-31

In biblical interpretation it is always important to use more literal and straightforward teaching sections to interpret parables and more figurative passages (as you would often find in the Book of Revelation), not the other way around. In this text we have a parable told by Jesus to drive home a certain lesson. The first objective is to understand the main point and then to determine whether some of the "window dressing" is significant or not. In this section of Luke, Jesus is addressing the Pharisees who love money and value things that are detestable in God's sight (16:14). Jesus points out that they have had the Law and the Prophets and then the preaching of John and those who were eager have been benefiting from the coming Kingdom.

The Pharisees, however, have not been affected by the word God sent. Clearly they are the ones in mind, when in the parable Abraham says "And if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." This statement looks forward to

Jesus' resurrection and is a prediction of how their hardness of heart will continue even after than happens.

The parable as Jesus tells it is not a parable on how rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven or a parable to show that you can see from hell into heaven and talk to people across the gulf. Neither is it a parable on the nature of hell. It is a parable with a punch line to show the condition of the Pharisees' hearts. In the parable just before this one Jesus used the story of a dishonest manager who is praised by someone else to make a certain point (Luke 16:1-12). But the point is not that we should be dishonest. When we are interpreting parables we must be careful to get the main point and let the window dressing be just that.

This story is not only a parable but one that circulated in many different versions in Jewish circles even before Jesus, so that the basic plot of a rich man and a poor man who had their fortunes reversed was a familiar one to Jesus' listeners. Jesus appears to be taking a familiar story from their folklore and giving it a different bent to drive home a point about the close-mindedness of the Pharisees. In I Corinthians 15 Paul makes a reference to baptism for the dead that some apparently believed in, in order to make a certain point. His use of that illustration may be somewhat troubling, but it does not cause us to believe in practicing baptism for the dead, because there is an abundance of clear teaching that shows us how that would not be right. With this parable we have a similar situation. We have Jesus using a popular story to make a point, but we have an abundance of material that would keep us from drawing wrong conclusions about the future of the unsaved from the story.

But What Will Be the Effect?

Some fear that this non-traditional way of viewing hell might cause some people not to fear it enough or that it might cause some to have less motivation to become Christians. First of all, these matters must not determine what we

believe. Some people have less motivation to become Christians when they learn a total commitment of their lives is required but that just reveals their hearts and has nothing to do with the message we should preach. We must believe and teach what is biblical regardless of the reactions of people.

But second, as we move through the evangelistic preaching and conversions in the Book of Acts we find something very interesting: hell is never used as a motivation to get people to become Christians and certainly there is not a word about an everlasting conscious torment. Consequences of rejecting Jesus are described in Acts: (1) Anyone who does not listen will be cut off from his people (3:23); (2) salvation will be found in no one else (4:12); and (3) there will be a day of judgment where all men will face God (17:31). But while these ideas are found, the emphasis in Acts is clearly on what Jesus has done for us and the new life and salvation he can give as he brings us to God. In Acts 2, 3000 are baptized upon hearing of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and the promise that they could be forgiven and receive the Holy Spirit. They were urged to save themselves from a corrupt generation, not from an eternal existence in hell. In not one sermon is the traditional notion of hell even hinted at, and yet thousands became disciples from such preaching.

Even when we come to chapter 5 and the story of the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira references to hell are missing. Their deaths alone, resulting in separation for the family of God, are sufficient to send fear through the whole church. If ever there was a place one would expect to hear a biblical preacher declaring the traditional view of hell it would be in Stephen's speech in Acts 7. A scathing expose of the typically Jewish attitude toward God through the centuries and up to that time, it contains no references to on-going torment for those who reject God. Not holding back in anyway, he boldly describes their stiff necks and their uncircumcised hearts but says nothing about how they can expect to burn forever. The message brought to Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9 and 22)

contained no references to hell, but he was powerfully motivated by conviction of sin and the grace of God and became a sold out disciple. In his own subsequent preaching to Jews in Pisidian Antioch who rejected Jesus' message Paul said: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). The consequences of their rejection were dire indeed—they were forfeiting eternal life—but there is no mention of eternal torment. The choice is between death and eternal life. There was no last ditch effort to turn to everlasting torment to motivate them. If Jesus wasn't enough of a motivation, they would lose an incredible life.

And so it goes all through the Book of Acts. The word hell does not appear anywhere in the book nor is there any reference in evangelistic preaching to anything resembling on-going conscious torment in an afterlife. "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God," Paul told the Ephesians (Acts 20:27), but there is no evidence that Paul ever said anything to any church about our traditional view of hell. Yet, who can deny his evangelistic effectiveness. What motivated people to become Christians in the first century was not the threat of everlasting torment. They were motivated primarily by the cross and the resurrection which both convicted them of sin and showed them the love of God. Anyone who would be baptized into Christ primarily because he doesn't want to burn forever, does not understand the gospel or the God who sent it and does not have a disciple's heart. If someone would become a Christian to avoid the traditional hell, but would not become one if he was "only" going to be destroyed, you can be sure that he has no grasp of the love of God, the cross of Christ, or even the worth of his own body and soul. Such a person is still self-centered and unrepentant and not hungering and thirsting for God.

Similarly, if there are disciples who would no longer be as motivated to seek the lost because hell is no longer viewed as everlasting torment, their hearts are being revealed. Jesus viewed every human life as precious to God. He laid down his life so that no one would perish but

that every person might find life and immortality through the gospel. For anyone to miss this is a great and terrible tragedy, and there will be weeping and the gnashing of teeth in lives of all who fail to accept it. A move away from the traditional view of hell will not diminish evangelistic zeal in the hearts of those who love people. They will do all in their power to get others into the eternal Kingdom and to rescue them from the wrath that will destroy the lost. In our society it is not unusual to see people sacrifice and make heroic efforts to extend earthly life only a few years. Disciples of Jesus have a message desperately needed if life is to become eternal. How much more should we sacrifice to get it to others?

Conclusion

Let us believe whatever the Scriptures compel us to believe about the judgment of God and the future of the unsaved. Let us not think that correct doctrine will result in some loss to the church or the work of the Kingdom. Correct doctrine, whether regarding baptism, care of the poor, or the judgment of God always has the effect of exposing hearts—revealing those that are good and those that are not.

The wrath to come is real and will totally remove the lost from the presence of God. Do we understand what we have in Jesus? We are rescued from destruction and ushered into eternal life. The contrast between the darkness and the light is awesome. Let us praise God that Jesus has paid the wages of sin for us. Let us understand how much others need to know him and what a total loss they will suffer without him. Let us bind ourselves together with others to let the whole world know that death itself can die.

