



A CLOSER LOOK

AT THINGS PERTAINING TO THE FAITH

January 2002

The Biblical Doctrine of Hell

Don Walker

When Northwestern University School of Education questioned 500 ministers of various religious groups concerning certain biblical principles, 69% denied, "There is a hell."¹ In March of 1991, an article appeared in the *U.S. News and World Report*, entitled "Hell's Sober Comeback." In this article Martin Marty, a chronicler of American religious trends and professor of the University of Chicago Divinity School, observed that "hell has disappeared and no one noticed."² The sad truth is, many just simply do not believe hell exists, though the Bible says otherwise.

CONFUSION OVER TERMS

In studying the biblical doctrine of hell, a very definite challenge arises. For example, in Luke 16, Jesus spoke of "a certain rich man," and of a "certain beggar named Lazarus" (Luke 16:19, 20). Jesus tells us that both of these men died, and of the rich man, He says, "And in Hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments" (Luke 16:23). The ASV reads, "And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torments."

The difference in translation between the KJV and the ASV illustrates the source of the confusion. The English word, "hell" is found 23 times in the KJV of the Bible. The confusion that surrounds this word is "due to the fact that the English word 'hell' actually represents three different terms in the Greek New Testament."³ In Luke 16, the Greek word translated "hell" is "hades." Literally it means,

"not to be seen." It is the realm of the dead. It is this word that Jesus uses in Matthew 16:18. "And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." In this passage Jesus is speaking of the "gates of hades" or "the bars of death." The eternal abode of the wicked is not even in consideration in these passages even though the English word "hell" is used to translate them.⁴ Yet, the Bible does speak of an eternal abode for the wicked.

Out of the 23 times that "hell" is found in the KJV of the New Testament, 12 are a translation of the Greek word Gehenna. In James 3:6, we learn that the tongue can be used as an instrument of hell: "And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell." All other occurrences are uses by our Lord. In fact, Jesus had more to say about Hell than Heaven.

GEHENNA

The origin of the Greek word Gehenna is an interesting one. On the southern side of Jerusalem was a ravine known as the Valley of Hinnom. It was in this valley that many of the Hebrews offered their children into the fires of Molech (2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6). During King Josiah's reign the practice was abolished and this place became a place of abomination (2 Kings 23:10-14). It was not long, until the term Gehenna ("a transliteration of the Old Testament expression, 'the Valley

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focus:

Hell

of Hinnom”⁵) was used as a figure to refer to the final, eternal punishment of sinners.

In Mark 9 Jesus expressed, in a figure that could have literal application, the lengths that one should go to avoid this place of torments. “And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched” (Mark 9:43). “And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched” (Mark 9:45). “And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire” (Mark 9:47; See also Matthew 5:29,30). In the teaching of Jesus, we learn there is nothing here on earth that can compare to being cast into Gehenna. “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28; also Luke 12:5). Other uses by our Lord are warnings to the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23:15, 33).

In studying this subject, brother Wayne Jackson makes two observations concerning the nature of Gehenna.⁶ First he notes that it will be the body and soul that will be subjected to the agonies of Gehenna (Matt. 5:29,30; Mark 9:43-48; Matt. 10:28). Secondly, he states that Hell is a place of an eternal consciousness in torments rather than an act of annihilation (Mark 9:48; Matt. 25:46).

It is a true observation that men do not desire to discuss this most unpleasant topic. It seems even in the Lord’s church, there has been a tendency to shy away from much of the negative thoughts of the Bible, including the teaching on hell. Yet, as was mentioned earlier, the fact that Jesus had more to say about hell than He did heaven should stand

out as significant. The very fact that He warns of this most heinous place should propel it to a very high spot in our minds. It is true that the goodness of God and the hope of Heaven should be incentives to righteousness. However, that does not eliminate the validity of God’s severity (Rom. 11:22) and the fires of Hell serving as a deterrent from sin. If we are going to be serious students of the Bible, then we will study what the Bible teaches concerning this matter and meditate on it long and hard.

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¹Terry Hightower, ed., *Whatever Happened To Heaven And Hell?*, (San Antonio, TX: Shenandoah

church of Christ, 1993).

²Jeffery L. Sheler, “Hell’s Sober Comeback,” U.S. News And World Report, March 25, 1991, p. 56.

³Wayne Jackson, The Use of “Hell” in the New Testament, christiancourier.com/archives/ntHell.htm.

⁴In 2 Peter 2:4 Peter uses the Greek word tartaroo, which is translated by the English word hell. It is more than likely speaking of the place of torments in which the rich man found himself. It is that portion of the hades realm which holds the wicked until the day of judgment.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.



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“And if any was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire”
(Revelation 20:15).

Hell and the Love of God

Thomas Steed

Perhaps the most significant objection raised against belief in hell is its alleged incompatibility with the loving nature of God. No doubt, some of us have been challenged with the following question, “How could you believe that a loving God would send anyone to an eternal hell?”

But is it really the case that God’s love makes hell a reality impossible to affirm? It might seem that way to those who entertain a number of false notions concerning both the nature of love and of hell. But a thoughtful consideration of the Scriptures reveals that no such disharmony exists. Let’s notice some crucial biblical principles that can help to shed some light on the matter.

THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

Jesus identified our greatest obligation in life as one of unqualified love for God (Matt. 22:37). Because “God is love” (1 Jn. 4:9) He is wholly committed to what is good for us and our highest good is found in loving God Himself. This is precisely why our love for God is commanded by Him. God commands our love not only because He is worthy of it, but also because loving Him is both good and good for us. Indeed, we might say that God created us to the end that He would love us and we would love Him resulting in His eternal glorification and our eternal blessedness.

But while our highest good is found in loving God it is still something that must be *freely chosen* by us. The power to love another is rooted in the will. God has endowed us with free-will desiring that we would always choose the good but the very nature of freedom means that one can choose to do other than what they ought to. When we choose not to do the good we sin against our loving Creator and thereby demonstrate a lack of love for Him. Sin is saying “no” to God and His love. This

is why the relationship between love for God and obedience to His law is inseparable (Jn. 14:15; 1 Jn. 5:3). If my genuine desire in life is to love God then I will gladly conform my will to His and thereby manifest my love for Him.

We all then have an ultimate decision to make and that is whether we will love God. Our time on earth is granted so that we might make that decision. In spite of our sin God continues to seek our good and offers us forgiveness and reconciliation through the death of His Son (Rom. 5:6-11). He also continues to extend His grace, mercy and patience to those who choose not love him because He is not “willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

"YOU WERE NOT WILLING"

But what of those who persist in rejecting God’s offer of love? Will God force them to love Him so that they might be saved? Such an idea is certainly

contrary to the nature of love. Within the context of freedom not even God can guarantee that everyone will freely respond to Him. God does all He can to *persuade* us to love Him but He will not *coerce* us into it. God is deeply grieved when men reject Him but He is committed to honoring

their freedom and rewarding them in accordance with their choices (2 Cor. 5:10). Life’s ultimate tragedy is that many will finally determine not to love God and thereby bring upon themselves what they have willed for themselves— an existence apart from God.

Consider, as an example, Jesus rebuke of the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 23. After exposing the corruption of their hearts Jesus declares, “how can you escape the condemnation of hell?” (v. 33). One should not conclude that our Lord meant to convey that there was no possibility of salvation

“...our greatest obligation in life is one of unqualified love for God.”

for the Pharisees. Rather, His question points to their continued disregard for God, whereby they had rendered themselves incapable of responding to God's offer of love and grace. This is powerfully conveyed by Jesus moments later as He cries out, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings *but you were not willing!*" (v. 37). Through a veil of tears Jesus located the fate of the condemned *not* in God's will but *their own*. Let no one say that hell could not exist because God loves all men. Hell exists because men reject the love of the God who loves them!

FINAL SEPARATION

Imagine that someone you love continually sinned against you, rejected your constant attempts at reconciliation and refused to have anything more to do with you. Imagine further that you could see that your loved one's heart had become so resistant to your love that there was no longer any possibility that they would change the direction of their life. What more could you do? All that would remain would be a relationship destroyed by sin.

In a similar manner, apart from repentance, a life lived in disobedience to God and His Gospel will lead to a final and irrevocable severing of any hope of fellowship with God. This loss of relationship with God is what hell is. Among the many ways that hell is described in the Scriptures is that of banishment from the presence of God. To the wicked Jesus will say on the Day of Judgment, "Depart from Me" (Matt. 25:41). Those who do not know God and do not obey His Gospel will be "punished with everlasting destruction *from the presence of Lord* and the glory of His power" (2 Thess. 1: 9). John's divine vision describes the condemned as being "outside" the heavenly city and excluded from access to the tree of life (Rev. 22:14-15). All that remains for the souls of those who

have rejected God is the anguish, pain and misery of the loss of all that is good. This is the punishment the disobedient bring upon themselves.

CONCLUSION

Simply stated, heaven is designed for those who love God and keep his commandments. Should we determine to so order our lives God will grant us the desire of our heart. Hell is for those who chose to place love of self over love for God. They live by the famous statement in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven." As C. S. Lewis once observed, there are only two kinds of people, "those who say to God, 'Thy will be done' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'thy will be done.'" Whose will will be done in your life?



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From the Warren/Barnhart Debate:

Joe Barnhart argued: "...the doctrine of hell is the perversion of theology. And to call hell justice is wicked and sinful or whatever word you want to use. It's immoral."

Thomas Warren replied: "The only way (anyone) can accuse God of wrong is to be equal with God."

*A Closer Look is edited by
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