

## **Hell: The Missing Doctrine in Modern Gospel Preaching** [Matt. 25:31-33, & 41 – Jn. 5:28-29]

I'd like to begin with two brief "true" stories about hell:

1) **R.C. Sproul** related a true story about a man he dealt with using the EE approach to the Gospel. He asked the man: **"Do you know where you're going when you die?"** The man replied: "I know where I'm going when I die; ... I'm going to hell and it scares me to death!" ... Sproul explained the Gospel to him, the man repented and became a Christian. ... But God had already been at work in this man's heart, using 'the doctrine of hell' to prepare him for repentance.

2) A young boy, 6 or 7 years old was talking to a playmate through the backyard fence one day. The boy's family were not church goers and so he had not been taught even the most basic truths about biblical Christianity. The girl's family were church goers, and the little girl **began to tell the boy about heaven and hell.** The concept of a place of 'eternal torment' in fire struck terror in the boy's heart. He never forgot this conversation and what he learned about 'the doctrine of hell' from a playmate in his childhood. And God used it to prepare his heart for the Gospel. ... When he was 13 years old, he watched a Billy Graham Crusade on the television, heard the Gospel and became a Christian. He ordered the **Decision magazine** and immediately discovered God had given him the gift of teaching, which he used in youth groups and during his high school and college days. Eventually he became a pastor whom God blessed with many years in the Gospel ministry. [By now, you may have guessed that that boy was me! =)]

**"Hell"** [and the doctrine of God's wrath against sin] is such a **controversial, unpalatable, terrifying, hated and despised** subject that, in the modern era, it's almost never referred to.

**"R.C. Sproul:** ... "Hell is a place we don't want to go. A place of unapproachable pain and discomfort, a place of torment, physical or not." ... Many [most] are unwilling to accept Jesus' teaching that "... there will be a final judgment and a final separation – and that **not merely 'some,' but "many" ['most']** will be consigned to an eternal, never-ending experience of torment and suffering."

**John Gershner** said: "The whole idea of hell is so emotionally difficult for us to process that **the only person who could possibly convince us of the reality of hell is Jesus himself.**"

1. **R.C. Sproul** said: "... it is too great an emotional burden for our basic human nature to contemplate a never-ending, eternal, punishment for anyone at the hands of the Almighty God." ... [much less, I might add, the idea that the vast 'majority' of the human race will apparently meet this final destiny].

As a result of this, ... our modern culture has turned against the "Hell-fire & brimstone preaching" of the frontier days.

During the Great Awakening [18<sup>th</sup> Century], the ministry [preaching] of Jonathan Edwards [of Northampton, Mass.] was much associated with this doctrine ["Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," etc.]. ... R.C. Sproul commented that he was required to read a book in a college psychology class that claimed Edwards was "sadistic" because he preached so much about hell. But under his preaching [as well as that of George Whitfield, John and Charles Wesley, and others], there was a great revival, a Great Awakening that shook the world!

R. C. Sproul said: "Never in any other age has this doctrine been more challenged than today! ... Liberal Theologians say it was "a part of the world-view of primitive people," ... "a concept unworthy of the love of God and the love of Jesus;" ... replacing it with **the doctrine of annihilation, [or the doctrine of Universal Reconciliation]**. ... It is viewed as a **"scare technique** used by earlier preachers."

As a result of this, Sproul and others have compared our generation to the O.T. generation in which Amos lived; a time in which God said to the people through his prophet: “**Woe to you who are at ease [complacent] in Zion, ... who feel secure on Mount Samaria ...**” [Amos 6:1].

The problem with all of this is that most of what we know about hell comes not from earlier frontier preachers, but from Jesus Himself! ... In order to appreciate the significance of this fact, **we need to remind ourselves:**

**I. About WHO Jesus is: ...**

1. **After His early ministry**, at the time Jesus left Galilee [Northern Israel]. Jesus was obviously a very highly controversial character, and there was a wide divergence of opinion and confusion over who He was.

During His early ministry in Galilee, Jesus had worked mighty miracles, ... He walked on water, quieted the raging storms; fed the 5,000, turned the water to wine, he healed all sorts of diseases [the blind, the lame, the paralyzed, leprosy, the demon possessed] and made astonishing claims about Himself [cf. **Luke 4:21** – when Jesus was asked to read from the prophets [at his home-town synagogue in Nazareth] and He read from **Isaiah 61:1-2**, which clearly foretells the coming of the promised Messiah and Deliverer, and Jesus concluded His reading by saying to the people in the synagogue that day: “***Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.***”] ... We are told that the people were “furious” and that they drove him out of the town to the edge of a cliff where they were ready to kill him – but the Scripture simply says, he walked out from among them.

**John 7:11-13** describes the mood among the people when Jesus later entered Jerusalem, towards the end of His earthly ministry:

*And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, ‘He is a **good man**,’ others said, ‘No, he is leading the people astray.’ ... for fear of the Jews, no one spoke openly of him.”*

**C.S. Lewis said:** “You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come to any patronizing nonsense about his being ‘a great human teacher’. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

**James Boice put it this way:** “**Jesus said** >>>, ‘... I am God come to save fallen humanity; I am the means of salvation; trust me with your life and your future. ...

This is good news. It is even great news – but only if it is true. If it is not true, then we are of all men the most miserable and Jesus Christ should be hated as a fiend from hell. If it is not true, Jesus has condemned millions. He has sent generations of gullible followers to a hopeless eternity.”

2. **What were some of his claims** that created such great controversy?

a. **Jesus claimed to be able to forgive sins:**

i. Mark 2:5 – When Jesus healed the paralyzed man who was lowered through the roof in Capernaum, the Scripture says: “*And when Jesus saw their faith, **he said** to the paralytic, ... ‘Son, **your sins are forgiven.**’”*

ii. Luke 7:48 – The woman who was known by all to be a sinner [in some open way] wept as she washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and her hair. Jesus said to her: “***Your sins are forgiven.***”

On both these occasions those who were present immediately recognized the significance of this statement:

**Mark 2:7** – “***Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?***”

b. Jesus is also famous for his “**I am**” statements:

i. John 6:35 – “***I am the bread of life.***” [O.T. “Manna” from heaven]

ii. John 9:5 “***I am the light of the world.***”

iii. John 10:9 – “***I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved ...***”

iv. John 14:6 – “***I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.***”

c. **Jesus clearly considered the O.T. Scriptures to have been written mainly about himself!**

- i. John 5:46 – “... if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me.”
- ii. John 8:56 – “Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”
- iii. [Road to Emmaus] Luke 24:27 – “... beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”

iv. Isaiah 61:1-2 – When Jesus read about the promised Messiah in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, ... he concluded by saying: “*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*”

**d. Jesus openly claimed to be God!**

- i. John 8:58 – “*I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am.*”

[We are told that the Jews who surrounded him when he made this statement began to pick up stones to throw at him because they recognized this as a claim to deity.]

ii. John 20:28 – When the resurrected Jesus appeared to “Doubting **Thomas**,” Thomas said: “*My Lord and my God.*” >>>

And, **instead of replying as Paul and Barnabas did** later in a similar situation [during Paul’s missionary journey at Lystra], “... *Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you;*” ... [Acts 14:15]

**Instead, Jesus replied:** “*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*” [Jn. 10:29]

**II. We need, therefore, to consider carefully ‘what Jesus taught about hell’ and the significance of this doctrine ...**

**1. Note some of the descriptions, ... the images Jesus used to describe hell**

- a. a “place of outer darkness ...”
- b. “a place of torment”
- c. “the pit”, or “the abyss”
- d. “the place of eternal fire.”
- e. Listen to these **vivid descriptions of a “hell-fire and brimstone judgment”** from elsewhere in the Bible ...

**Gen. 19:24 Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens.**

**Psalms 11:6 Upon the wicked He will rain coals; Fire and brimstone and a burning wind Shall be the portion of their cup.**

**Rev. 21:8 "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." ...**

**2. The question has obviously been raised** as to whether these **images** of hell in Scripture are meant to portray a **‘literal’** place of torment and torture by fire, ... or are they to be understood **symbolically?**

**R.C. Sproul** commented that although it is certainly a possibility that God could resurrect the **bodies** of unbelievers and make them fit for such an eternal suffering in a literal hell fire, ... However, in general, classic, orthodox Christianity has not taken these images literally.

However, this gives little relief because [even if these are ‘symbolic’ representations] the function of a ‘symbol’ is to demonstrate the nature of the reality. And, the question, therefore, is: “Is the ‘reality’ less intense, or more intense than the symbol? – Answer: The reality [says Sproul] is even more ghastly than the symbol.”

R.C. Sproul mentioned that one writer commented that the sinner in hell would give all that he has to be in the literal lake of fire than where he actually is.

The teaching of Scripture is that **heaven** is blissful because God is there in all the riches of his blessedness:

**Psalm 16:11** – “... *In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*”

But **Scripture also teaches that God is present in hell** dispensing his perfect justice in the punishment he metes out upon the damned [treasonous, unrepentant sinners].

*Where can I go from Your Spirit?*

*Or where can I flee from Your presence?*

*If I ascend into heaven, You are there;*

*If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. [Psa. 139:7-8, NKJV]*

Therefore, biblical “Salvation” really means deliverance **by** God and **from** God!

**I Thess. 1:10** says God “... rescues us from the coming wrath.” [i.e., the Wrath of God!]

But **II Thess. 1:6-9** says – “**God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you<sup>7</sup> and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.** <sup>8</sup>**He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.** <sup>9</sup>**They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord**” ... [i.e. his ‘blessed’ presence – Psa. 16:11] *and from the glory of his might ...*”

**To summarize: Hell is the place you do not want to be when you die! It is a place of torment, outer darkness, eternal fire [symbolic or literal?]**

### 3. What can we learn about hell from the images that are used in Scripture?

**The image of: “Outer Darkness” ...**

**Matt. 22** contains “**The Parable of the Wedding Feast**” –

Without expounding all the details of this parable, suffice it to say – for our purposes – that those who are consigned to hell in this parable are pictured under the image of an individual the king discovered among the guests celebrating at the wedding banquet who was not clothed in the proper wedding clothes [this obviously seems to suggest the robe of righteousness Jesus provides to cover all the redeemed in the holy presence of the Heavenly Father - Isa. 61:10; II Cor. 5:21, etc.].

This imagery suggests that those in hell [who lack the imputed righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ] have been **excluded from all the joys and delights of heaven**. Instead of celebrating in the midst of a joyful crowd, they are shut out in outer darkness - it is an image of being rejected, cast out and alone, in outer darkness instead enjoying the brightness and warmth that fills the banquet room. [... and this forever!]

R.C. Sproul points out that “outer darkness” is the imagery of **the curse in the O.T.** ... Those who were privileged to enjoy the blessedness of the presence of God [as it was mediated to them through the priesthood and the tabernacle and temple worship] were the Israel of God. **All others are viewed as “outside”** this special position of privilege and favor, ... i.e., in “outer darkness.”

It is significant that when Jesus was crucified, darkness was over Jerusalem.

Therefore, the “outer darkness” that Jesus refers to is the place of the curse of God, ... where the radiance and light of God’s blessed presence [Psa. 16:11] does not shine. It is **the place of God’s disfavor!!!**

**The image of: “weeping and gnashing of teeth”**

Jesus added these words ... “***There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.***”

**R.C. Sproul** commented on this verse:

“There are different kinds of weeping: those who mourn, those who are in pain; ... yet there is also the weeping of those who are deliriously happy. ... But when Jesus adds “... ***the gnashing of teeth,***” he is talking about a deep, deep mournful kind of wailing!

“The ‘gnashing of teeth’ in the N.T. is most often associated with hatred [i.e. bitterness, a vindictive spirit]. For example, **in Acts, chapter 7, when the Jews were convicted by Stephen’s preaching**, we read these words: “*When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, **they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.**” “... they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him,<sup>58</sup> dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.”*

[**Personal note:** I have encountered many over the years who are “angry at God”; “full of resentment” because of things that have happened to them in their lives. – some of these actually curse God, while others are simply in bondage all their lives to a bitter and vindictive spirit. They are paranoid, oversuspicious and mistrustful. – Satan uses this to keep them from a true saving knowledge of God through Christ!]

**The Bible warns about this spirit of bitterness and vindictiveness, and it is especially descriptive of those who wind up in hell ...**

**Rev. 16:9-11** regarding the outpouring of the 5<sup>th</sup> bowl of God’s wrath:

*9 They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.*

*<sup>10</sup> The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in agony <sup>11</sup> and **cursed the God of heaven** because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.*

**Rev. 16:21-** Regarding the outpouring of the 7<sup>th</sup> bowl of wrath ...<sup>21</sup> *From the sky huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, fell on people. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible.*

**Rev. 9:20-21** – regarding the unrepentant spirit of those impacted by the 6<sup>th</sup> trumpet:

*<sup>20</sup> The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. <sup>21</sup> Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.*

**Rev. 17:14** – regarding those who make war against the Lamb of God ... *They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings*

**Rev. 19:9** - *Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to wage war against the rider on the horse and his army.*

**Summary: Romans 8:7** suggests that people go to hell in the first place because they are “hostile” toward God! ... Then, when they find themselves in the horrible place called hell, when they weep in pain, they also **gnash their teeth** in an even greater hatred of God!

<sup>7</sup> **The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.**

**The image of: “Separation” ...**

In Jesus’ **Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25:31**, he describes the final judgment as a time when he will sit on his throne of judgment and **SEPARATE** the sheep from the goats [the saved from the lost!]. At that time, we are told, he will declare to the lost: “depart from me ye workers of iniquity ... into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

The “**image**” here is that of “**separation**” [the sheep from the goats]!

**R.C. Sproul** says the Greek word used to describe “judgment” is “Creesis,” a word from which our English word “**crisis**” is derived. ... [Whether mankind believes it or not], ... **Hell is the most cataclysmic ‘crisis’ anyone will ever face!** The supreme crisis for the human race will be the ‘crisis’ of this last, final great day of judgment! ... It will be a time of “separation,” the saved from the lost; ... and no one will be able to escape it [II Cor. 5:10; Acts 17:31].

**The image of: Greater and lesser punishment in hell ...**

Luke 10:13-15 - <sup>13</sup>“*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.*”

<sup>14</sup> *But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. <sup>15</sup> And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades.”*

Luke 12:47-48 – <sup>47</sup> *“The servant who knows the master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be **beaten with ‘many’ blows.** <sup>48</sup> But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be **beaten with ‘few’ blows.**”*

v. 48 - *From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”*

Therefore, there will be “degrees” of punishment in hell, because it is the place of the ‘exacting’ of the perfect and just punishment of God that is due for the acts of treason and rebellion that have been committed against him and his law by these unrepentant sinners.

### **The question of the love of God ...**

People have said that the doctrine of hell demeans the very character of God, ... i.e., the goodness of God and the idea that he is a God of love. They say: “If God is really ‘loving’ and ‘good’ he would never send anyone to hell. ... If God were really ‘loving’ there would be no hell!”

**Analogy:** “If a parent were really ‘loving’ he would never punish his child.” ...

Of course, the objection raised: “But this is ‘corrective’ punishment, ... it is tempered and measured to fit the crime. It is designed to help the child avoid the difficulties later in life. ... And, **as a matter of fact, the bible says “God chastises those he loves” [Heb. 12:6].** But this chastisement is but for a moment and is given for our welfare and wellbeing.

**But in hell, we are not talking about God’s ‘corrective’ wrath, but we are talking about his ‘punitive’ wrath [upon unrepentant rebels].**

**R.C. Sproul** addresses this question about the love of God and his punishment of evil by posing the question: **“What is the greatest object of God’s love?”**

**R.C. Sproul:** “I once heard a TV preacher say: ‘God loves everybody unconditionally!’ But this is not true. The salvific love of God is **conditional!** It requires **repentance and faith!** Etc.

“True, there is ‘common grace’ in which the benevolence of God is shown toward unrepentant rebels [*“he causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust”* - Matt. 5:45]. However, we are told [Rom. 2:4] that this grace is only temporary, in this life, in this present world. But that **does not extend forever.**

“In fact, **Romans 2:4** tells us **there is a ‘design’ for this “common grace”** [this benevolence of God shown toward rebels in this present lifetime]; ... **It is to provide people an opportunity to repent; ... to turn from their sinful rebellion and take advantage of the mercy found in Christ the Savior.**”

**“But God has a greater love [a greater concern] for his own righteousness and for his own fundamental character [i.e. who and what he is! ... God is not going to compromise his own righteousness and holiness to accommodate sinful rebels who commit treason against him! In other words, there is a sense in which God loves his own glory and goodness and refuses to compromise it to accommodate sinners. ... Therefore, in this sense, hell actually glorifies God! It shows his justice and his goodness. **God’s ‘goodness’ does not require****

**that he empty hell.** A ‘good’ and ‘just’ and ‘holy’ God cannot leave sin unpunished! God’s ‘goodness does not require him to abandon his own justice and righteousness.’

**Sproul goes on to say:** “The problem with hell [for man] **is** the “goodness of God”! ... It’s because God is ‘good’ that there is hell! When he punishes evil, “... *the judgment of God is according to truth*” [Rom. 2:2].

How can unrepentant, unbelieving sinners, think God is going to be merciful in spite of their rejection of his Son and his truth? ... in spite of their refusal to repent?

In **Acts 17:30b-31** we are told that God “**commands** all people everywhere to repent (and) has appointed a day and a judge by which he will judge the world.

And **most of the world** is doing **what Scripture commands ‘against’** here; ... thinking they will be okay **without repentance and faith in the Savior;** thinking that they will ‘escape’ the judgment of God! And, unfortunately, many preachers are encouraging this mindset; ... saying “... *peace, peace ... when there is no peace*” [Jer. 6:14 & 8:11]; ... denying the very reality of hell & of judgment to come.

**Instead of** understanding that the goodness of God [common grace] is meant to lead them to repentance, ... **they are** [Rom. 2:4] “*treasuring up to themselves wrath against the day of wrath.*”

**In other words,** people who persist in the denial of the final judgment and hell are “hoarders”, amassing [to themselves] a reserve supply of the punitive wrath of God!

**Conclusion:** The important question we must all ask ourselves as we consider the doctrine of God’s wrath and the eternal torment of hell is this: ... **Do I really believe this doctrine?** And if I truly believe, how can I be “*at ease in Zion*” when I know many of my loved ones, friends and neighbors are on the broad road that leads to destruction?

It is true that many will refuse to take heed to our warning, ... and that we may be hated and despised because we cry out [“Don’t judge me!”]; ... but Jesus has called his followers to be “*the light of the world*” [Matt. 5:14]. And he has told us **not** to “*hide*” our light under a bowl, but rather to put it on a lampstand for all to see!

This is important because **if people will take advantage of God’s offer of forgiveness in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we can escape the wrath of God in hell;** ... **I Thess. 1:10** says Jesus “... *rescues us from the coming wrath.*” [cf. Jn.14:6]

Heb. 2:3 says: “*How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?*” Heb.10:23-24 – “*If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, <sup>27</sup> but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.*” ... **Jn. 5:24; Jn. 6:37; I Thess. 1:10**

