

Grace Pastors Fellowship

***Hell: Defined, Defended, and
Declared***

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“The more difficult question is not how a God of love could send sinners to hell, but how a God of holiness, justice and wrath could allow sinners into heaven!”

Do most North Americans still believe in hell? In 2008 the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conducted a U.S. Religious Landscape Survey involving 35,000 people. One of the questions was, “Do you think there is a hell, where people who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally punished?” 59% of the respondents said they did (compare that with the 74% who believe in heaven). Of those between the ages of 18 and 29, 62% said they believed in hell. Of those who were over 65 years old, 57% said they believed in hell. Interesting. The survey showed as well that the more education a person had the less likely he was to believe. Very telling is the percentage of those who thought they would go to hell. It was a whopping one-half of 1%! Also interesting is that 7 years before this survey, a 2001 Gallup survey indicated that 71% of respondents said they believed in hell. In the U.S., belief in hell is clearly on the decline.

Canada bears its own religious stamp. In 2010 the Carleton University Survey Centre and the Association for Canadian Studies determined from a survey of 420 Canadians that just over half of us believe there is a heaven, but less than one third accept that there is a hell. The attitude of many of those who do not is summed up by S. Kaye Saunders in *Hell Exposed*: “Hell is a state of mind. It is a remnant of ancient man’s fears and an anachronism from our primitive past. I disavow it. Therefore it does not exist.”¹

We expect a different response from those who identify themselves as belonging to Evangelical Protestant Churches. In the U.S. Survey referred to above, 82% of evangelicals indicated that they believed in eternal punishment in hell. That leaves

¹ Saunders, p. 1.

almost one fifth who don't. Also, 46% of evangelical seminary students surveyed felt that it was in "poor taste" to preach on hell.

As the modern church tries to market itself and Jesus in today's society, it is not surprising to hear that hell is getting the soft sell. Many want to present a kinder, gentler God than that of former generations. Gone are the days of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God". Rob Bell's *Love Wins* is where it's at in our tolerant non-judgmental society. Universalism is becoming more and more attractive, or at the very least, annihilationism. A few short generations ago, eternal punishment in hell was considered one of those non-negotiable realities of the Christian faith. Now it seems to be very much under attack. As John Gerstner puts it, "Modern Christian theology has tended to take either the pain out of eternity or the eternity out of pain."

In the light of all of these developments, it is important for those who believe in preaching the whole counsel of God today to properly define, cogently defend and passionately declare the Biblical doctrine of hell.

1. Defining the Biblical Doctrine of Hell

To echo the apostle Paul, "To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and for you it is safe" (Phil. 3:1). The following is, I trust, familiar ground, but so important for us to stand upon solidly.

Hell is not a state of mind. It is not another name for the painful experiences of this present life. "I went through hell", is not a statement that can be accurately made by those who are still alive. Neither is hell a place where reformation or restoration take place. This is how the Philadelphia Confession sums it up:

The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Beside these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledges none.²

And again,

The end of God's appointing this day is for the manifestation of the glory of His mercy, in the eternal salvation of the elect; and of His justice, in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient. For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fullness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord; but the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.³

Here is how Wellins Calcott describes hell:

“Hell is no less than the eternal and second death, in its utmost extent and terror, as, just in all respects the opposite to eternal life, ‘tis the most finished misery of the wicked, wherein they are eternally separated from the pleasing perception of God, and the fruition of all kinds of good, confined in chains of despair and darkness, under the lively and afflicting sense of the punishing vengeance of the Deity, justly kindled and continually flaming against them for their offensive actions, and in a wise and equitable proportion to the measure of those offences. So that they are filled with incessant stings and horrors of conscience and tormented in soul and body with such painful and raging flames, as will forever distress, but never consume their bodies, or destroy a lively consciousness of guilt in their souls to all eternity.”⁴

Hell is that place of eternal, conscious punishment into which Satan, all evil spirits and the world of the ungodly are cast because of their rebellion against an infinitely good and just and holy God. It is the place where the fullness of the wrath of

² Philadelphia Confession of Faith, p. 60.

³ Ibid., p. 61.

⁴ Saunders, p.1

God falls upon sinners. Numerous scripture passages show that the above statements about hell are firmly grounded in the Word of God.⁵

Foundational Words:

There are three main words that translators have rendered as “hell” over the years: Sheol (שְׁאוֹל), Hades (ᾗδης) and Gehenna (γέεννα). It is probably the part of wisdom that the ESV has been content to transliterate Sheol in the Old Testament and Hades in the New and reserved “hell” primarily for Gehenna in the New.

Sheol is essentially the realm of the dead, the underworld. It is a place of darkness, forgetfulness, inactivity and relative silence.⁶ It is the dreaded destiny of all, but especially the wicked.⁷ Robert Morey, after referring to B.B. Warfield for support, states, “Modern scholarship understands the word Sheol to refer to the place where the soul or spirit of man goes at death. None of the lexicographical literature defines Sheol as referring to the grave or to passing into nonexistence.”⁸ The godly have glimmers of hope that they may indeed escape it.⁹ A good grasp of Biblical Theology and the progress of revelation as one goes from the Old to the New Testament is important here, because it is Jesus who “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (1 Tm. 1:10). The Old Testament saints knew that the wicked would be punished, because God was just and holy, but the details of exactly how and when and where were not very clear. Sheol still remained shadowy for them.

⁵ Ps. 9:17; Pr. 5:5; 9:18; Is. 30:33; 33:14; 66:24; Dn. 12:2; Mt. 3:12; 5:22, 29, 30; 8:11, 12; 10:28; Mt. 13:42, 50; 18:8, 9; 23:15, 23; 25:41, 46; Mk. 9:43, 45, 47; Lu. 12:5; 16:19-31; 2 Th. 1:9; 2 Pt. 2:4; Jude 6; Re. 14:10, 11; 19:20; 20:10, 15; 21:8.

⁶ Jb. 10:21, 22; Ps. 143:3.

⁷ Gn. 37:35; Ps. 88:3; Ps. 9:7; Pr. 5:5.

⁸ Morey, p. 73.

⁹ Ps. 16:10; 30:3; 49:15; 86:13.

Two texts that especially seem to break the veil of silence are Isaiah 66:24 and Daniel 12:2. They are respectively, “And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.” “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” Both of these texts will be later taken up in the teaching of Jesus and His apostles.

Hades is the Greek word for this realm of the dead, the underworld. In sixty-one out of the sixty-five occurrences of Sheol, Hades is the word that the LXX uses to translate it. Hades is also found ten times in the New Testament. But due to the increasing revelation of God’s truth, it now becomes clear that Hades is indeed a place of punishment for the wicked. Luke 16 with its description of the rich man makes that point. From Jesus’ picture of Hades, it is clear that the wicked go there immediately after they die even while other family members are still alive. It is where their soul or spirit is being punished during the intermediate state. The righteous go immediately to paradise or “Abraham’s side”.

Gehenna is a New Testament word with a depth of Old Testament background and imagery. The Valley of the Son of Hinnom is where Israel burned their sons and daughters to Molech the god of the Ammonites, blatantly ignoring God’s prior warnings and following the lead of such ungodly kings as Ahaz and Manasseh.¹⁰ King Josiah stepped up to the plate and brought an end to this abominable practice.¹¹ It was this

¹⁰ Le. 18:21; 20:1, 2; De. 12:29-31; 2 Ch. 28:3; 33:6; Ps. 106:37, 38.

¹¹ 2 Ki. 23:10.

valley that Jeremiah renamed the Valley of Slaughter because of the judgment of God that would fall on Israel.¹² According to Jewish sources, this valley became the garbage dump for Jerusalem, where the refuse and offal of the city found its way. The carcasses of dead animals and of criminals were also thrown here.¹³ The fires were continually burning and the worms were continually gnawing. The Hebrew word for valley, ge (גֵּ), is then combined with hinnom to give us Gehenna. Jesus uses this word in 11 of its 12 occurrences with reference to that final, eternal and terrible abode of the wicked. Hell then is the garbage heap for rebellious humanity.

The question of the literalness of the worm and the fire in hell has been hotly debated, but should not be a major concern. As Jesus relates the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man cries out that he is “tormented in this flame” and begs that the tip of Lazarus’ finger might be dipped in water to cool his tongue. This is from a man whose body has been buried. Satan and his demons are spirit-creatures and yet are tormented eternally in the lake of fire. Whatever the fires of hell are, they are well able to represent the wrath of God coming to rest on those who have no bodies. Also, like the fire at the burning bush, they burn without burning up.

It seems more consistent to understand the fire and the worms in the same way we look at the heavenly Jerusalem, with its streets of gold and gates of pearl. God is seeking to convey to us in familiar terms what is in reality far greater than we could ever possibly imagine. When Paul was caught up into Paradise “he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Co. 12:3). So it will be with hell. Whatever a

¹² Je. 7:31, 32.

¹³ Blanchard, p. 130.

sinner can imagine hell to be like, by the imagery of fire, worms and outer darkness, it is certain to be far worse. In the words of Jonathan Edwards regarding the awfulness of hell, “After we have said our utmost and thought our utmost, all that we have said or thought is but a faint shadow of what really is.”¹⁴

The Already and Not Yet of Hell

We are familiar with thinking of our salvation in terms of the “already and the not yet”. Already we are saved, justified, forgiven, adopted, reconciled, sanctified and given the indwelling Holy Spirit. We can now taste and experience a bit of the life of heaven while still here on earth. We have the firstfruits of the Spirit. But we still await the final installment of God’s great work of salvation. We shall be finally resurrected, perfected and glorified together with Christ.

So it is with hell. The lost even now are in the same kingdom of darkness as are the devil and his angels. They are already dead in their trespasses and sins. They are without God in this world. Already the wicked are condemned and under the wrath of God, and from time to time may experience temporal punishments that are the direct result of their sinful ways. They are presently perishing. Every additional year spent in sin is one more year when the original image of God in them is being destroyed. While their outward man is perishing, their inward man is also being ruined from day to day.

If heaven is the *telos* of the believers’ salvation, hell is the *telos* of the unbelievers’ condemnation. Hell brings the final installment of death, the second death, which is separation from God for all eternity. It is the final experience of the fullness of

¹⁴ Gerstner, p. 58.

the wrath of God. Hell is darkness with no light to flee to. It is the final and eternal destruction, ruin, and perishing of one who once bore in Adam the likeness of God.

Hell was already present in germinal form when Adam fell in the Garden of Eden. There Adam and Eve already began to die. They were separated from God, banished from His presence, began to feel His wrath in the punishments inflicted, and looked less and less like God's image bearers. All sinners share this experience in Adam, and begin to taste hell in this life. But if it is true that the best is yet to come for believers, it is also sadly true that the worst is yet to come for the ungodly. As Morgan states, "The evidence is compelling: the pictures of hell can be viewed as culminations, extensions, intensifications, and logical continuations of the unbeliever's current state of sin."¹⁵

2. Defending the Biblical Doctrine of Hell

Every major doctrine in God's Word has come under attack by false teachers throughout the history of the church. It should not be a surprise then, to find that this is true of the Biblical doctrine of hell. Attempts have been made to modify it through the Roman Catholic teaching on purgatory. Others have in essence denied it by teaching universalism. Still others have redefined hell by advocating some form of annihilationism.

Purgatory and universalism are so patently without Biblical support that we will not spend time in their refutation. Some may feel the same way about annihilationism, but we will take time to present a few arguments against this false teaching, partly

¹⁵ Keller, p.46, 47.

because some who hold this position declare their commitment to all that the Scriptures teach and to evangelical doctrine.

Annihilationists assert that at some point after this life is over, the wicked simply cease to exist. They are annihilated. As is to be expected, there are numerous variations on this theme. The atheist and the humanist believe that this life is simply all that there is and that everyone is annihilated at death. Others, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses insist that only the wicked are annihilated, and that this takes place at death. For them there is no future resurrection. Still others hold to a general resurrection of the righteous and the wicked, but that the punishment of the wicked consists solely in them being annihilated.

A more developed and more carefully constructed form of annihilationism has been held or promoted by men such as John Stott, John Wenham, Philip Hughes, Clark Pinnock, Edward Fudge, and Harold Camping and tentatively considered by F.F. Bruce and C.S. Lewis. Since the 1980s there has been a definite resurgence of this teaching, especially in England, but also in North America.

They believe in the resurrection of the dead and the day of judgment and that those who are saved by Jesus Christ will be welcomed into the presence of the Lord for all eternity. However, they hold that the wicked will endure suffering for their sins only for a temporary period of time, depending on their degree of sinfulness, and then they will be annihilated. Hell will ultimately be emptied of all human inhabitants.

Their main objection is to the eternal nature of the punishment of hell. Their arguments against it are many and varied. Some are purely emotional, as they

sometimes make use of inflammatory language and build straw men. As Pinnock reflects on the “traditional” position, as held by Jonathan Edwards, he states, “It would not be unfair to picture the traditional doctrine in this way: just as one can imagine certain people watching a cat trapped in a microwave oven squirming in agony and taking delight in it, so the saints in heaven will, according to Edwards, experience the torments of the damned with pleasure and satisfaction.”¹⁶ Actually, this *is* an unfair and grossly inaccurate picture.

Their Biblical arguments are what concern us. They would point out that the Bible often uses words such as “destroy”, “everlasting destruction” and “perish” to refer to the destiny of the wicked. “Surely that is clear,” we are told. ““Destroy” means exactly that: they are destroyed, put out of existence, annihilated!” Yes, in certain contexts it may, but in others it may well mean “to ruin completely, to tear down, to crush, to render useless, to subdue”. One excellent example is found by comparing Re. 17:8 with Re. 20:10. In the first text we read, “The beast that you saw was, and is not and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction...” Does destruction there mean “to put out of existence”? Not according to Re. 20:10 where we are told “And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” It is this kind of destruction that is shared by those sinners who, like the devil, the beast and the false prophet, are “thrown into the lake of fire” in Re. 20:15.

The explanation that annihilationists give to avoid the eternal nature of punishment in hell is that it is not the torment itself that is unending, but rather the

¹⁶ Pinnock, p.6.

results of that punishment. Sinners suffer the eternal consequence of their sins. They die and cannot come back to life...ever. But that is not what God says. God says that the punishment itself is eternal. The fire is described as unquenchable and eternal. The smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. Their worm never dies. To logically follow the imagery of Scripture, the smoke is always going up because the torment continues. The smoke continues because the fire continues to burn. The fire continues to burn because of the ongoing presence of those being punished for their sins. Without any wood, the fire goes out. Without any fire, the smoke ceases to rise. When a carcass is gone the worm dies.

It seems that behind all of this dancing around the Biblical data on hell is the argument that a God of love would surely not send people to an eternal hell for sins committed in so brief a lifetime. It just would not be fair.

Why Eternal Punishment in Hell is Just

Those who object to eternal punishment have forgotten several important truths. The first is that God is always perfectly just in His dealings with man. "...Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Ge. 18:25) is Abraham's cry. Psalm 96:13 reminds us that "...He will judge the world in righteousness..." Also, God's perfect justice rests on a foundation of perfect knowledge of everyone He judges. "...All are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (He. 4:13). Therefore, if God says that eternal punishment is just, then it is just, whether or not we understand it.

Secondly, God's infinite attributes are far greater than we can grasp with our finite and sin-affected minds. He is so much more powerful than we could ever imagine. Job declares, "Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?" (Job 26:14). God's love is so much greater than we could ever imagine. Paul speaks of its breadth and length and height and depth and wants us to know the love of Christ that "surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:18, 19). But what about God's wrath? Is it possible that we have not fully grasped just how infinitely intense is His holy abhorrence against sin? The Psalmist asks, "Who considers (understands, knows) the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?" (Psa. 90:11). In this life God is constantly holding back his wrath, in longsuffering and forbearance. This world has never tasted the fullness of it, yet. But hell is that final revelation and unleashing of that stored-up wrath. It will be poured out full strength.

Thirdly, the time it takes to commit a crime does not determine the length of its punishment, even in human courts. It may take someone only five minutes to kill twenty people in a crowded mall. It may take someone else five years to embezzle funds from a large company. Does the murderer have the right to object, "But, Your Honour, why should I get a life sentence for something that only took me five minutes to commit"? It is the nature of the crime that determines the amount of punishment.

Our crime is that in Adam and in our own persons we have rebelled against our own Maker. We have sinned willfully and repeatedly. He has exercised infinite patience with us and has continued to be good and kind to us every day of our lives. He has even sent His own Son into our world as the Saviour for sinners and invited each

one of us to come to Him and be saved. It should come as no surprise, then, that multiplied sins against such an infinitely good, loving and glorious God deserve infinite punishment. Besides, if it were a finite punishment that we deserved, then we would actually be able to pay off our debt and we would not really need Christ's atoning death for our sins. Only when sinners have too light a view of sin against God is eternal punishment considered to be too heavy a punishment to endure.

Fourthly, consider what sinners will continue to do in hell. They will sin! The day of judgment will not bring about the regeneration of the wicked. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.¹⁷ Therefore, for all eternity, the ungodly will continue to possess a heart that remains in rebellion against God. They will continue to commit ongoing sins of omission as they fail to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. Eternal sinning is alone sufficient justification for eternal punishment. Justice demands it.

Despite all of these Biblical and reasonable arguments, it should not surprise us to hear the protests continue. Do not the guilty always protest? Will the disobedient children of the world ever all agree that the punishment their parents administered was fair? Will the lazy and disrespectful students of the world ever all agree that their teachers were just in handing out suspensions or failing grades? Will the criminals filling our jails all proclaim that they have received what they deserved? Neither will a world of sinners ever be convinced that they deserve eternal punishment. Only on the day of judgment will every mouth be silenced.

¹⁷ Mt. 7:18.

3. Declaring the Biblical Doctrine of Hell

That we should declare the truth about hell is beyond question. In Acts 20, when the apostle Paul had gathered the Ephesians elders together he said, “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:26, 27). We must follow in his steps and not shrink back. We must follow in our Saviour’s steps who spoke so often about Gehenna and warned repeatedly of the “weeping and gnashing of teeth” that lies ahead for the impenitent. Whether we are speaking to the outwardly religious like John the Baptist’s audience or to the politically powerful, like Paul before Felix, they need to hear from us about “the coming judgment” (Acts 24:25).

The word of the Lord to the prophet Ezekiel is for us as well. “But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman’s hand...Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me” (Ez. 33:6, 7). We have a solemn responsibility to warn sinners of the wrath to come.

How We Should Preach on Hell

When we preach on hell, it must be with an earnestness borne out of a deep conviction of the truth that we declare and of the urgency of the situation that our lost listeners are in if they remain without Christ. If it has not first moved us and captured our hearts and minds it will not likely do that for our hearers. In his book *Power in the Pulpit*, Gardiner Spring says,

There must be two great constituent elements in the preacher himself, without which the attention of his audience cannot be secured; they are the subject-matter of his preaching, and the interest which he himself takes in what he utters...George Whitefield was probably the most remarkable man, in this respect, whom the world has seen. Rich as his discourses were, they do not compare with the discourses of some other preachers in richness of thought. But in intensity of feeling, he had no equal. He enchained his auditory by his intense interest in his subject. A ship-carpenter once remarked, that 'he could usually build a ship from stem to stern, during the sermon; but under Mr. Whitefield he could not lay a single plank'.¹⁸

We must also preach on hell with Biblical accuracy. It is important to go wherever and as far as the Scriptures take us, but no further. Where the Scriptures are silent, we should be too. While Jesus spoke of hell, of eternal fire, of outer darkness, of weeping and gnashing of teeth, he did not draw graphic pictures and give lurid and detailed descriptions of the experiences of sinners in torment. If we dramatize and embellish and imaginatively elaborate on the horrors of hell and by this manipulate the emotions of our audience, we have abused them and misused our gifts and calling. A Roman Catholic priest wrote the following in a tract for children in the nineteenth century:

The little child is in this red-hot oven. Hear how it screams to come out. See how it turns and twists itself about in the fire. It beats its head against the roof of the oven and stamps its little feet upon the floor.¹⁹

This kind of hell-fire-and-brimstone preaching surely has no place in our ministry.

Our preaching on hell must always be a speaking of the truth in love. Our hearers must know that we take no sadistic pleasure in thinking about the punishment of sinners in hell. We grieve over the lost and desire to snatch them as brands from the burning. As the Lord commands, "Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn

¹⁸ Spring, p. 131,132.

¹⁹ Blanchard, p. 124.

from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?"(Eze. 33:11). If we are not preaching about hell with tears in our eyes, we must at the very least have tears in our hearts and compassion in our voices as we speak of such a dreaded and awful eternity that awaits unrepentant sinners.

We must also keep in mind that someone in our congregation may have recently lost an unsaved loved one who even now they suspect is in hell. This fact may make it very difficult for them emotionally. This is all the more reason to preach with compassion.

It almost goes without saying that we must prepare and preach on hell prayerfully. This is a subject that the lost especially do not want to hear about, and that Satan and his hosts hate with a passion. It should not surprise us that we may become the target of his flaming darts as we seek to proclaim this doctrine.

Why We Should Preach on Hell

The benefits of preaching on hell are many. It is one of the most sobering of subjects. It places eternal issues at the front and centre of our thinking. It puts the affairs of this life into proper perspective. "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?" (Mt. 16:26).

It also intensifies concern for the lost. We become more burdened for those who attend our services who are still outside of Christ. We are stirred up to pray for the salvation of the children of our members or for members whose spiritual state we wonder about. It spurs us on to think about ways to reach our neighbours and our communities with the gospel. It motivates us to continue to work for the extension of

God's kingdom throughout the world. But if belief in hell wanes, so will the sense of urgency to reach the lost with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Messages on hell are good for those to hear who have become careless in their Christian walk and who appear to be slacking off in their pursuit of holiness. These messages can be a wake-up call to those who have been treating sin lightly. There are definitely times when fear of pain can be an excellent motivator. I know that that statement can be misinterpreted, so let me explain.

Eleven out of the twelve times Gehenna occurs in the New Testament it is found on the lips of Jesus. In eight of those eleven times Jesus uses the pain of hell to motivate people to choose a less painful alternative.

Two times, in Mt. 10:28 and Lu. 12:5, Jesus warns his disciples "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." You can either become a disciple of Jesus Christ and face the pain of persecution for a brief time, or you can remain in unbelief and face the wrath of God for all eternity in soul and body. Unbelievers need to be reminded of this as well. While they count the cost of coming to Christ, they need to count the costs of not coming to Christ.

Then, six times Jesus uses Gehenna to motivate sinners and professing believers to deal drastically and mercilessly with their sin. He demands radical repentance in Mt. 5:29, 30; 18:9; Mk. 9:43, 45, and 47. The choice is between cutting off and tearing out your (right) hand, foot, and (right) eye, or being thrown into hell with everything intact. It is either the painful task of genuine repentance from sins you are so

attached to, or it is the pain of eternal fire. The point is, there is no escaping a painful experience. However, the pain of persecution and repentance is both temporary and sweet and leads to amazing joy, while the pain of hell just gets worse and worse with no end in sight.

This is powerful! We need to be careful not to buy into a Christian hedonism that insists that the only proper motivation for coming to Christ and for living a holy life is to accentuate the positive. Jesus uses hell as a very strong motivator, and so must we.

Preaching on hell is also helpful as we encourage our people to seek to live peaceably with all men and not to take vengeance on their enemies who have grievously hurt them or their loved ones. We all have a keen sense of justice. But the Lord says, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord"" (Ro 12:19). The wicked of this world never get away with sin. God will see to that. We can rest our case in His hands.

Finally, one of the great benefits of preaching on hell is that it reveals the amazing depths of the love of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ. This is so important for us and our people to grasp, because so often eternal punishment in hell and a God of love are presented as incompatible. After all, we are asked, "How could a loving God ever send anyone to hell?"

It is ironic that those who attempt to preserve a God of love by denying eternal punishment actually end up robbing God's love of its greatest and deepest expression. On the other hand, those who present the terrifying and Biblical picture of God's holy

wrath unleashed in hell are by this means able to present to sinners a God whose love is “so amazing, so divine” that it “demands my soul, my life, my all”!

We see God’s love for us at the cross. There the Father sacrificed His own beloved Son. There Jesus gave Himself as the propitiation for our sins. But what was the extent of His sufferings there? How much did he pay? If that price was the equivalent of a temporal period of suffering followed by physical death, then we certainly owe Him our thanks. But what if all hell was unleashed upon Him?

Tim Keller uses the following illustration in one of his sermons, tracing it back to Martin Lloyd-Jones. There are two close friends who meet and began talking with each other. “I was at your house this morning,” remarks the first man. “I saw a bill on the table, so I paid it in full.” How does the second man react? Does he say a brief, “Thanks”, and shake his friend’s hand? Or do his eyes well up with tears and is he left speechless as he reaches out to warmly embrace his benefactor? It all depends. There is something missing in the story. It is crucial to know how much the bill was for. Was it a bill for a couple of dollars of overdue postage? Or was it for a huge medical bill, for tens of thousands of dollars not covered by any insurance? If it was the smaller amount, a handshake will do. But if it is the latter, then that changes everything.

What *did* Jesus pay on the cross? Oh, dear brothers and sisters, not just some short temporary penalty, but in matchless love He endured our eternal hell, with all the abandonment by God that it entails, with all the ruin and destruction that it involves, and with the horrible infliction of pain and agony of body and soul that millions of sinners

would otherwise have to begin, but never finish enduring. You deserve it. I deserve it, but Jesus paid it all for all of His elect. Hallelujah, what a Saviour!

A shallow, inadequate view of hell will inevitably mean a weak preaching of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Conversely, preaching on the horrors of hell provides a most natural transition to the beauty of Calvary, the love of God and to Jesus Christ, the propitiation for our sins.

We close by listening again to the solemn words of Edwards, who faithfully warned his unsaved hearers of their coming danger:

“When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all; you will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite. Oh, who can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it, gives but a very feeble, faint representation of it; tis inexpressible and inconceivable. For, *who knows the power of God’s anger?*”²⁰

Dear friend, reader or listener, even fellow pastors, are you sure that this will not be your destiny? Are you sure that you have truly repented of your sin to God and are you sure that you are trusting in Jesus Christ alone for salvation? Come to Him. It is not yet too late.

²⁰ Gerstner, p. 77, 78.

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