

Hell—Is It Real To You?

Proverbs 15:24; Matthew 25:46

July 30, 2006

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Having considered the subject of heaven from our text, let us now take up the subject of hell from the same text.

It is not uncommon to find people who affirm a belief in a place of everlasting joy called “heaven” to deny such a place of everlasting punishment called “hell.” How often in the course of a week do we hear the word “hell” used to punctuate sentences, which so trivializes hell that there is little or no terror associated with it. For that which we profane with our speech, we do not take seriously. Jokes about hell are even told by professing Christians further demeaning its grave significance. One might as well make fun of house-fires, which destroy many lives each year as to make fun of hell-fire which shall torment millions of persons forever and ever.

Dear ones, the same God that revealed an eternal reward in heaven for all those who receive saving grace through the Lord Jesus Christ also revealed an eternal punishment in hell for all those who remain in sin and guilt through their own self-righteousness. In Matthew 25:31ff, the Lord Jesus describes for us that final day of Judgment. But notice the final verse in that chapter (Matthew 25:46) where the Lord clearly distinguishes between the wicked who are sent to “everlasting punishment” in hell and the righteous who inherit “eternal life.” The doctrines of heaven and hell stand together or fall together. And stand they will, for they stand upon the authority of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. In fact, we find more about the doctrine of hell from the very words of Christ in the Gospels than from any other portion of the Bible. One cannot (in all consistency) embrace Christ by faith alone and receive what He declares concerning the glories of heaven without also receiving what He declares concerning the everlasting torments of hell.

if you would desire with all of your hearts to escape the temporal flames of a house on fire, how much more you should desire with all that is within you to escape the eternal flames of a lake of fire. Those who can tune out the Lord (and His minister) when He speaks of the torments of hell are calloused and unbelieving indeed. I ask you today, “What do you believe concerning hell?” Have you given little or no thought to this essential teaching of Jesus Christ? Does the doctrine of hell motivate you to greater holiness, greater faithfulness, and greater love for the Lord Jesus Christ? Or do you live your life as if hell does not really exist at all? Hell is not only a profitable teaching for the unbelieving sinner to hear, but is also profitable for the child of God to hear as well.

This Lord’s Day let us consider the following two questions that arise from our text in Proverbs 15:24: (1) Why Are We To Depart from Hell? (2) Who Are Those Who Will Suffer in Hell?

I. Why Are We To Depart From Hell?

A. Solomon encourages the wise man, woman, and child with these words: “The way of life is above to the wise, THAT HE MAY DEPART FROM HELL BENEATH.”

1. The word translated “hell” is the Hebrew word *sheol*. *Sheol* is also translated in many verses as “grave” in the Old Testament Scriptures (Psalm 141:7). It would appear, however, that in our text Solomon is contrasting heaven above to which the righteous go with hell beneath to which the wicked go (and not simply the grave to which both the righteous and the wicked go at the point of death).

2. It should be observed that hell is not a doctrine unique to Christ and the apostles in the New Testament. It is also taught in the Old Testament (Psalm 9:17). The Lord Jesus tells us that hell was

originally prepared for the devil and the angels that fell with him (Matthew 25:41).

a. When man swallowed the lie of the devil, that to sin against God would make him like God, man reaped the same condemnation of everlasting fire in hell as the devil. Man who has chosen to follow the will of the devil upon earth shall live in communion with the devil (the epitome of all evil) in everlasting torment without even a minute's break from the agony of God's just judgment.

b. Dear ones, those with whom we choose to commune in familiar fellowship here upon the earth (whether it be the wicked or whether it be the righteous) are those with whom we will spend all eternity (whether in hell or in heaven). For those whom we want to be like and want to be with in this life declare our true heart's desires. Who do you want to think like, speak like, and act like? Movie stars, rock stars, sports stars, the rich, the powerful, and the famous as they walk that broad path that leads to everlasting destruction? Or the godly, faithful, covenanted witnesses of Christ and even the persecuted martyrs of the Lord Jesus as they walked that narrow path that leads to everlasting life? What is it that most delights your heart about which to talk? The latest movie, the newest song, the most recent fashion, the money you have made, the promotion at work, the improvements you have made on your house, the success of your children, or the degree you have achieved? Or do you delight most in talking about the God of your salvation—His holiness, His mercy, His faithfulness, His promises, and His commandments. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. And if your heart is with the ungodly, your eternal home will be with the devil and all the ungodly in hell as well.

B. But now we must ask: Why should we want to depart from hell? Let me give you several reasons.

1. Because hell's punishment is EVERLASTING.

a. Listen to the language God has chosen to employ in describing the duration of hell's punishment: "it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into EVERLASTING fire" (Matthew 18:8); "and these shall go away into EVERLASTING punishment" (Matthew 25:46); "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); "the smoke of their torment ascendeth up FOR EVER AND EVER, and they have no rest day nor night" (Revelation 14:11); "and shall be tormented day and night FOR EVER AND EVER" (Revelation 20:10). Are these declarations of the Lord exaggerations? No! Are they merely intended for effect? No! Is the punishment of hell temporary? Certainly not! Can it ever be relaxed, or can one ever escape from it for even a moment? Absolutely not!

b. Just as the Greek word for "everlasting" and "eternal" (*aiōnion*) is used for the duration of the punishment in hell (in Matthew 25:46), so likewise in the same verse the same Greek word (*aiōnion*) is used for the duration of the life of communion with God in heaven: "And these shall go away into everlasting (*aiōnion*) punishment, but the righteous into life eternal (*aiōnion*)." Thus, if the pleasures of heaven never end, then the torments of hell never end.

c. *Aion* in Greek means age and denotes duration within that age. Of itself *aion* does not determine the length of the age in view, for there are two *aions* known in Scripture: the present age upon the earth and the future age after death (as we see in Matthew 12:32 and Ephesians 1:21 where the English word "world" stands for the Greek word "*aion*"). If anything belongs to this present world (or age—*aion*), it is limited in its duration and is temporal. If anything belongs to the future world (or age—*aion*), it is unlimited in its duration and is eternal. Thus, if punishment of the wicked occurs in this present age, it is temporal and will end with death. But if punishment of the wicked occurs in the future age, it is eternal and will never end because that future age never ends. Thus, those who object to the eternal nature of punishment in hell because the word "eternal" belongs to an age, must prove from the Scripture that there is no endless age ever mentioned in the Bible. But as we have already shown (from Matthew 25:46), there is an endless age in heaven just as there is an endless age in hell.

d. The sin committed in this present world is not committed against the justice of a mere temporal, earthly king, but is committed against the justice of an eternal, heavenly King. Whereas crimes committed against mortal kings cannot be punished beyond the grave, crimes committed against the immortal King of kings can and will be punished beyond the grave and that punishment will never cease. In other words, the duration of punishment directly corresponds to the king against whom the crime is committed and how long he reigns as king (consider this distinction in Matthew 10:28). Since God is eternal, His justice is eternal, and He rules forever and ever. Unforgiven sins will be forever punished.

e. Even punishment for an entire lifetime in prison will come to an end. There is at least a real hope for any who waste away in prison. But here is a prison sentence that will never ever end. When Peter was in jail he had temporal chains fastened to his hands (in Acts 11), for they fell off (and sooner or later the chains will be removed from all who are in prison in this present world); but the chains of hell are described as “everlasting chains” (Jude 6), and they will never be removed. There is not a moment of rest, or peace from the just, righteous, and holy punishment of the eternal Judge. Now that is sobering.

2. Why should you want to depart from hell beneath? Because hell’s punishment is not only physical torment, but mental torment as well.

a. Hell is described with the most painful picture imaginable: eternal flames of fire that continue to burn, but never consume those cast therein. This is why so many of the martyrs of Christ suffered death by flames at the stake. Their persecutors spared no degree of pain in unjustly tormenting the faithful in times past.

(1) We certainly see in the present age how that which is physically painful also torments the mind of man. We are united by God as body and soul in such a way that the soul can affect the health and well-being of the body, and the health of the body can affect the peace and rest of the soul. You women who have had extreme pain in labor and child birth can no doubt attest to the relationship between body and the mind. I well remember the kidney stone attack I had a few years ago and how I went from torment in body and mind to peace in body and mind once I received sufficient pain medication.

(2) This sermon is so difficult to preach, but these things must be said in order to be faithful. Can you imagine suffering the greatest intensity of pain that may be experienced here upon the earth forever without relief, without a break? The terrors of hell are indeed unimaginable. Listen to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 13:47-50 (and also the words found in Revelation 14:10-11). This everlasting gnawing torment of the conscience is expressed in the words of the Lord Jesus as found in Mark 9:44: “Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.” The torment of the conscience is no less real torment than that of the body. One form of torment plays on the other.

b. We may even be tempted in our ignorance and corrupt sense of justice to question the justice of God as we consider the torments of hell.

(1) Some may question, “Isn’t God love? Where is His love manifested in such a punishment?” Yes, God is love and He demonstrates a love of benevolence by leaving all men with a revelation of Himself (whether in nature or in the gospel). God has revealed Himself to all men, but man (due to the corruption and rebellion of His own heart) refuses the revelation of God and reaps the judgment of God. God’s love of benevolence is manifested to even the reprobate who will never come to Christ even though they are called in the gospel to come to Christ. However, the electing, redeeming, and sanctifying love of God is manifested only in the lives of those who are His adopted children through faith alone in Jesus Christ. God is not a Father to save the damned in hell—He is their Judge. And as their Judge, He must judge righteously and not with partiality. He must repay the unforgiven sinner as his sins truly deserve. Otherwise, he would not be God—He would be like corrupt man. Dear ones, God’s perfect justice demands that the guilt of sin be paid. Either the sinner must pay that guilt of sin, or it must be paid vicariously by another. Here is the wonder of the good news of Jesus Christ. God has sent His only begotten Son to suffer His infinite wrath and to pay the debt of sin for elect sinners which we could never pay if we suffered for all eternity in hell. After all,

the reason the punishment in hell never ends is because the debt of sin's guilt which man owes to an infinitely holy and eternal God is never fully paid. But Jesus Christ, being the eternal Son of God, became a man that He might suffer that debt of guilt for man. And His bodily resurrection from the grave (the empty tomb) is God's proof that the debt has been paid in full for all who will embrace Jesus Christ by faith alone. Dear ones, remember the punishment of hell is not remedial (i.e. it is not intended to reform sinners who are cast therein), it is retributive (i.e. it is intended to repay the sinner as his sins justly deserve).

3. Why should you want to depart from hell? Because there is no divine restraint in hell of man's wicked passions. In other words, there is no longer grace in any sense in hell (neither common grace to all man, nor special grace to any particular man in hell). Another reason then why hell is everlasting is because man's hatred for God and rebellion against God will be forever manifested in his passions. He will continue to curse God, but will never be able to die. If holiness issues in true happiness (as we noted in the sermon on heaven), wickedness issues in true misery as we see is the lot of those who suffer in hell. If men will curse and hate God for the plagues He sends upon the earth (where the Lord does yet restrain the sinful passions of men by His common grace) as we see man does in Revelation 16:9-11, how much more will man curse and hate God when all divine restraint is forever removed? Every man in hell will become like the devil. Just as the righteous in heaven will become like the Lord Jesus Christ, so the damned in hell will become like their captain. How we ought to thank the Lord that He presently restrains (by His grace and power) the sinful passions of the wicked so that our neighbors do not fall into absolute, unrestrained demonic hatred for us and others! That is what makes hell absolutely unique—there is no restraint to man's hatred and misery.

4. Why should you want to depart from hell? Because there is no hope in hell. Hell is eternal. Hell is torment, and there is no hope of ever escaping. Hopelessness even here on the earth can drive a person to despair of life and sinfully commit suicide. In hell, however, there are no suicides. There is no rest from torment. The hopelessness of fear and the fear of hopelessness is ever present with the damned in hell. In hell there is only the darkness of the full realization of utter hopelessness—the suffering will never end. There is absolutely no way to remove oneself from its everlasting chains.

5. Why should you want to depart from hell? Because the sight of the Son of God and the joy of those whom He has redeemed will only add to their misery (Luke 16:23). Whether the wicked will behold the joy of the righteous with their eyes or by way of some supernatural vision, I cannot say. But the wicked will not be able to find any rest from the condemning conscience which will forever ring from God's just judgment: "Depart from me ye workers of iniquity." And equally condemning to the conscience will be the words of Christ to those who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ: "Well done, good and faithful servant... enter thou into the joy of thy lord."

6. Dear ones, this is what makes hell, hell. This is why the wise man departs from hell beneath that he may walk the narrow path that leads to everlasting life in heaven above. Only one who believes Jesus is a liar would be so foolish to disregard and ignore His words about hell.

II. Who Are Those Who Will Suffer in Hell?

A. All those who rebel against God and remain in the guilt of their own sin (Revelation 21:8).

B. Just as there are degrees of reward in heaven, so the Bible teaches there are degrees of punishment in hell. And it is especially those who have been exposed to the gospel of salvation, who have heard the invitations to come to Christ, who have been raised in Christian homes, and yet have not embraced Jesus Christ by faith alone but have rather ignored and neglected the call of Christ who will suffer the greatest degree of punishment in hell (Matthew 11:24; Luke 12:47-48).

C. Is fear of hell a proper motive for obedience in the life of the child of God who is trusting in Jesus Christ alone for his eternal salvation?

1. Although as Christians we do not walk in the liberty which Christ has purchased for us to the degree that we ought, nevertheless, fear of the all-consuming wrath and vengeance of God as a holy Judge has been removed for the child of God that is justified by faith alone (Romans 8:1; 1 John 4:18).

2. Dear ones, God is no longer your angry Judge if you are united to Christ Jesus by faith. But rather God is now your loving Father who disciplines you out of love for your good that you might grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. You have a fatherly fear of God now, but not a slavish fear of God as an avenging Judge. God needs no longer to repay you as your sins justly deserve, because Christ has already paid the debt of guilt in full which your sins justly deserve. Therefore, the child of God who is trusting in Jesus Christ alone for his eternal salvation need never fear hell, for hell is for those whose debt of sin forever remains.

D. How then may the child of God benefit from the study of hell?

1. Hell explodes the vanity and pride of man in showing so clearly to us all what our sins justly deserve from a holy God. For hell reveals the infinite justice of a holy God. It is true that there are many things in life that are not justly administered by man. We may complain time and again how life is not fair. But let us never forget that if God were entirely fair (or just) with us, we would spend all eternity in hell for our own sins.

2. Hell reveals not only the justice of God, but the free mercy and grace of God in rescuing sinners like you and me from the very place we deserve to be. A serious contemplation of hell, should have the effect of producing endless praise and thanksgiving to the God of all mercy who freely sent His only begotten Son to satisfy His infinite justice. Dear ones, if you are trusting alone in the Lord Jesus Christ today for your eternal salvation, this sermon on hell should leave you praising the sovereign grace and love of God for sinners. For you are by nature no better than those who spend eternity in hell. It is due to God's love in His sovereign and unconditional election; God's love in sending a perfect Redeemer who fulfilled the law of God for you and suffered the penalty of guilt which you deserved; and God's love in freely giving you His Spirit who has created you anew, giving you faith in Christ alone, and every other grace you need to live the Christian life.

3. Hell also reveals how much your infinitely holy God hates sin. For this is true justice. This is what sin actually deserves from a holy and eternal God. This sermon on hell should also have the effect of causing you to hate sin more and more as it is manifested in your life. Rather than being a lover of sin and its pleasures, you who know the realities of hell should continuously pray and seek grace to hate your sin and crucify it by the grace of God.

4. Hell reveals the urgency of taking the gospel of salvation to those who are perishing. If you believe the doctrine of hell as taught by Jesus Christ, you cannot take lightly that there are many around you who are under the wrath of God and in a far worse condition than one who is perishing in a burning building. A serious contemplation of hell should incite the Christian to have a zeal to promote the gospel to family, friends, and even strangers when God opens such a door.

Dear ones, in closing, there are no second chances in hell. Your death seals your fate forever. If you die in the Lord, you enjoy the delights and joys of God in heaven forever. If you die having turned your back on the offer of Christ to come to Him for everlasting life and forgiveness of your sin, you will never know joy, peace, love, or freedom from pain ever again. Those are the options. Like the prodigal son, come to the Lord right now, confessing your need of Christ and placing your trust in Christ alone who is able to save you from hell beneath and usher you into heaven above.

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