

The Disappearance of Hell Part 1

sermonaudio.com

Luke

By Richard Caldwell Jr.

Bible Text: Luke 21:8

Preached on: Sunday, August 10, 2014

Founders Baptist Church

24724 Aldine Westfield

Spring TX 77373

Website: www.foundersbaptist.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/smbconline

Luke 21 is where we are in our study of Luke's account of the life and death and resurrection of our Savior. Luke 21 in the midst of a study of the Olivet Discourse called the Olivet Discourse because it was a discourse given on the Mount of Olives. We are in the midst of the beginning portion of it. We are looking at verses 5-9 and that is where I want us to read again today. Luke 21 beginning with verse 5,

"5 And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he," that is Jesus, "said, 6 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.' 7 And they asked him, 'Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?' 8 And he said, 'See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, "I am he!" and, "The time is at hand!" Do not go after them. 9 And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.'"

We are concentrating this morning on the eighth verse, "And he said, "See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them." Jesus promised the presence of imposters during the age that would precede his return to the earth. During the time time, the time that we are now living in between the ascension of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus, Jesus said there would be imposters, in fact, he said there would be many. Last Sunday we looked at the presence of imposters. We talked about the proliferation of imposters during the time of the apostles, during the time prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. We looked at church history. We talked about how the early church had to battle for an Orthodox view of Jesus. We talked about the various counsels and creeds. We talked about the fact that there are many false Christ's even in our own day. This has never stopped and in the context of that, today I wanted to take a day, we are going to do it both this morning and this evening, and I wanted to talk to you about a very specific way that Jesus is being counterfeited. A very specific way that the true Jesus is being rejected. I want to remind us that a faithful view of Jesus is not just believing in him as Savior. It is also believing in him as Judge. That is, we don't have the right view of Jesus if we don't

have the Jesus who warned about hell. The true Jesus did not just announce salvation in himself, he announced the coming judgment and himself as Judge. He preached good news but he also warned of the fires of hell.

Has hell disappeared today? Has it gone out of existence? Has the church ceased to believe in it anymore? Is that why the church has largely ceased to preach about it? If we are ashamed of the message of hell, then we are ashamed of our Savior because he preached often about hell. And he preached about it in very clear terms. That subject is very germane to the verses that we are looking at the entire section, entire discourse because Jesus is talking about his second coming and he made plain that when he returns again he is coming not just to bring salvation, he is coming to bring judgment. Matthew 25:31 says this, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'" And then he says this, "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

I'm going to talk more about this before the day is over but I just want you to notice that in the very same sentence, Jesus spoke not only of eternal life, he also spoke of eternal punishment. You can't cut that sentence in half and say, "We believe in eternal life but we don't believe in eternal punishment." The word "eternal" is the same. It means the same thing. Moses Stewart in 1830 said this, "We must either admit the endless misery of hell or give up the endless happiness of heaven." If you are going to say that eternal life means life forever in the presence of God, in the presence of blessing, enormous, inestimable, gracious blessing, if that is eternal life then what is eternal punishment? If eternal life speaks of an everlasting conscious existence, then what is eternal punishment? "And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life."

My first point this morning is this: the disappearance of hell. The disappearance of hell and I'm not going to spend a lot of time this morning making the case that the church has

become silent on the subject of hell. In this case, I think that is pretty self-evident, don't you? If we pay much attention to the contemporary preaching of our time to the church growth strategies. I think it is self-evident. I was told recently of a very popular church in our area, someone who used to attend there, he told me that they organized their preaching series into four large categories and they rotate them year after year. I mean, the messages turn out to be somewhat different but the subject matter is always the same. At the beginning of the year, you are going to talk about new beginnings. At the end of the year, you are going to talk about Christmas and the holidays. In between, you are going to talk about marriage and relationships. Needless to say, hell doesn't make the list.

On the popular level in terms of what is being preached in our churches, the emphasis on the reality of hell does not match the emphasis that Jesus gave to it but more than that we can say not only does the emphasis not match, the subject is virtually nonexistent. It is deemed to be bad for business. It is deemed in a very strange twist to be unloving, unkind, impolite, unseemly. The subject seems to embarrass the church of our time. It is thought to be a subject that belongs to a bygone era, to an ancient time, an antiquated time, a time of superstition, an age of heavy-handed fear mongering. Even in evangelical circles, churches that for the most part strive to preach the gospel and strive to preach the Bible, we seem to believe that hell is not a message we want to preach. We don't want to preach it to the lost and we don't want to preach it to the church. Rather, we will just emphasize the love of God and the grace of God and the goodness of God. I would even warn us that in reformed circles, I think there is such an emphasis on declaring the love of God and the grace of God and the beauty of God that we are in danger of preaching God in a one dimensional manner. There is no doubt God delights in mercy. We sung about it this morning. Aren't we grateful for his mercy? But we dare not forget that God's beauty is not one dimensional. God is beauty, he is beautiful in justice. He is beautiful in judgment. That is a part of his nature and character to be just and so the result is that Jesus is being presented in a one dimensional way. He has come to save but he is not to be feared as Judge. Salvation is offered but there is no real consequence to rejecting the offer. It is almost presented this way: you either get salvation or you miss out on it. And what is to be feared is not hell. What is to be feared is unhappiness. "Receive Jesus and you will be so happy. Reject Jesus and you will miss out on the happiness. You can't have a great life now if you don't have Jesus," which of course is true. It is also true that if you don't receive Christ you are going to spend eternity in hell.

So, on the popular level in terms of what is happening in our churches, hell seems to have disappeared but what you may not know is that what is happening in our churches simply mirrors what has been happening in the scholarly arena for some time. What has been happening in the academy, what has been happening in print in the lifetime of some who are old enough in this room, there have been some notable departures from the biblical doctrine of eternal torment. Someone as well known and influential as the late John Stott. Have you ever heard the name John Stott? On many levels a wonderful exergy. I love his commentary on the book of 1 John; it is outstanding. But John Stott denied that hell is to be understood as eternal conscious suffering and after he came out and denied it, then he said he really hadn't changed his position, this is what he has believed all along for years and years. He said this, "Would there not then be a serious disproportion between sins

consciously committed in time and torment consciously experienced throughout eternity?" Did you hear what he said? "You consciously commit sin in time but then you have to suffer for it consciously forever, doesn't that seem uneven? Something done in time, then you suffer for it forever." That is what he is saying. He says it's unjust and it just doesn't make sense. He thought himself to still affirm "the eternal damnation of the impenitent." He says he still believes in eternal or he said he still believed in eternal damnation, how does he do that? Well, he believed in what now has come to be known as conditionalism, you could also describe it as annihilationism. So the eternal aspect of damnation is that you never get to enjoy eternal life and those who believe in conditionalism they fall into two camps: some believe you immediately go out of existence if you die without Christ; others believe you suffer for a while and you suffer your way out of existence. But in both cases there is no eternal conscious torment.

John Wenham, another famous theologian, died I think in 1996 and he said this, "Unending torment speaks to me of sadism, not justice. It is a doctrine which I do not know how to preach without negating the loveliness and glory of God. From the days of Tertullian, it has been the emphasis of fanatics. It is a doctrine that makes the inquisition look reasonable. It all seems a flight from reality and common sense." You see, it is antiquated; it is ancient; it is superstition; it is not real.

That's what he's saying and I wish that those were the only two examples I could give you this morning but there are many, many, many others. They fall into two camps: there are those who believe in universalism, one day everyone is going to be saved; and there are those who believe in annihilationism or conditionalism, you eventually go out of existence or you go out of existence right away after death if you don't receive Jesus. And it's called conditionalism because they believe that immortality is conditional. It's not just a part of how God created us. It is not that humans go on with immortality either in heaven or in hell but rather immortality is what God grants in salvation so if he doesn't grant you immortality, thus it is conditional, if he doesn't grant you immortality, then when you die you just go out of existence or you suffer for a time and then you go out of existence.

Clark Pinnock had this to say, "The idea that hell means everlasting conscious punishment contributes much to belief in universal salvation." He is saying, "Why would anybody be a universalist? Well, it's because some people believe in an everlasting hell." And he says this, "If the choice is between hell as everlasting torture and universal salvation, who could resist the latter? Sensitive persons would be practically forced to accept it." He says, "They cannot accept that God would subject anyone even most corrupt sinners, to unending torture in both body and soul as Augustine and Jonathan Edwards taught. If that is what hell means, many will conclude that there should not be a doctrine of hell in Christian theology." What is Pinnock saying? Hes saying it's bad for evangelism. I mean, no one is going to believe in a God like that.

So, that leaves us with only one other choice. If that is the alternative, we just have one other choice and that is universalism and Pinnock, of course, rejected that but he was a conditionalist, he believes now there is no such thing as everlasting punishment. In all

those statements, there seems to be a blindness to the fact that we don't get to determine what is real. In the final analysis, it doesn't matter to me what Augustine believed or what Edwards believed or what Pinnock believes or what Stott believed or what Wenham believed. What matters is: what does the Bible say? God tells us what is real. We don't get to determine what is real based upon our own sensitivities, our own sense of justice, our own pragmatic view of what will work, what will sell, what people will accept. That doesn't make reality. Reality is what God tells us that it is.

So, is hell real? Is it eternal? Is there going to be everlasting conscious torment in the case of those who die without the true and living God? And is there a way to be delivered from it? Now, what we are going to do for the most part this morning and this evening, we are just going to listen to Jesus. We're talking about do we have the real Jesus? Jesus says, "There will be many, many imposters," from the time of his ascension to the time of his return. Do we have the real Jesus? Do we have the right Jesus? If you have the right Jesus, you don't just have a right view of him as Savior, you have a right view of him as Judge. We're going to listen to his descriptions of hell.

That is my second point this morning and throughout this evening: Christ's descriptions of hell. We are going to organize them under seven headings. Look at the first one this morning, come back this evening. You don't want to miss this evening. I have a lot prepared for you. We are going to see the additional six this evening. But here are the seven if you want to write them down. We are going to talk about the reality of hell; the duration of hell; the fearfulness of hell; the characteristics of hell; the population of hell; the influence of hell; and the alternative to hell. Let me repeat those: the reality of hell; the duration of hell; the fearfulness of hell; the characteristics of hell; the population of hell; the influence of hell; and then we'll magnify the grace of God and we'll talk about the alternative to hell.

But this morning we talk about the reality of it. If there is one unmistakable thing about what Jesus taught concerning hell, it would be that he believed it is real and it is fearful. You don't want to go there. That is what Jesus taught. He treated it as a place and a very real place. The word that you find in Matthew, Mark and Luke is the Greek word "Gehenna," and when you look up that word in a lexicon, you are going to find something similar to this, this is from the Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: "Gehenna, a Hellenize transliteration of the Hebrew Hinnom Valley, a ravine just south, southwest of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, a place of trash, fires and perpetually burning rubbish hence the figurative extension of a place of eternal punishment." He says that in this place where they had this perpetual burning of trash, there came to be an association between that place of forever burning of trash with the final place of judgment. I would tell you there is to my knowledge anyway, there is zero historical evidence that there was ever a perpetually trash burning going on there so I don't know where that started. I think a better explanation is found in a Greek English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature: "Gehenna, Grecanized from Ge Ben Hinnom, that is Valley of Hinnom or Valley of the Sons of Hinnom, a ravine south of Jerusalem. There according to later Jewish popular belief, God's final judgment was to take place. In the gospels it, was the place of punishment in the next life,

hell." I like that because they don't identify how that ravine came to be associated with hell. Some think it's because there at one time there were child sacrifices in the name of Moloch, pagan activity that took place there maybe that's why it came to be associated with hell. We don't know for certain so what I am saying to you is this: you are not going to understand Gehenna by its etymology. You are going to understand it by listening to what the Bible says about it. The statements found in Scripture that describe it and what is plain as you look at the Bible is that Jesus warned about it. You don't warn about imaginary things. Do you? Anybody in this room make it a habit of warning about things that don't exist? You warn about real things.

Jesus warned about a very real place of judgment. For example, Matthew 5:22, "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." Matthew 5:29, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell." Matthew 18:8, "And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire." Matthew 10:28, "And 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."

By the way, there is another word you find in the New Testament, we know it as Hades and that is a more general word and it is used sometimes to describe the place of intermediate suffering. The place where people go immediately after death in soul form and suffer but Gehenna refers to the place of final judgment where body and soul, people are cast into this place. You know there is a future resurrection not just for the living but for the dead and the second death will be being cast body and soul into hell. Luke 12:4, "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!"

Now, there are others I could give to you as well and there are many we will look at this evening in addition to these but I think that is enough to demonstrate that Jesus presented hell as something real and something to be feared. Charles Spurgeon said this, "Now do not begin telling me that that is metaphorical fire. Who cares for that? If a man were to threaten to give me a metaphorical blow on the head, I should care very little about it. He will be welcome to give me as many as he pleased and what say the wicked? We do not care about metaphorical fires but they are real, sir. Yes, as real as yourself. There is a real fire in hell as truly as you now have a real body. A fire exactly like that which we have on earth in everything except this, that it will not consume though it will torture you." I don't think I would have said it exactly like Spurgeon said it when he said, "A fire exactly like that which we have on earth," I don't know that I would say it that way. What I would say is, "God is giving us a description that we can get and hell is described in

terms of fire and hell is described in terms of burning and hell is described in terms of torture and anguish and pain and weeping and gnashing of teeth. Hell is a real place of everlasting torment." Men may want to eliminate hell but you can't eliminate hell and claim to be a believer in Christ because Christ, the true Christ, the biblical Christ, warned of a very real hell. So I would ask you, do you believe him? Do you believe Jesus when he tells you, when he tells me, when he tells us that hell is real? Do you believe him? Do you believe him when he tells you that hell is to be feared? Do you believe him? So, that is the first thought, the first category as we talk about what Jesus taught about hell. He taught hell to be real. As Spurgeon said, he wasn't talking about some sort of metaphorical blows given to the head that no one cares about, he is talking about a reality.

So I want to just stop there this morning and we will come back tonight and look at the other six but as we come to an end this morning, I want to finish by asking and answering four questions. The first one is this: why does hell exist? Why does hell exist? For the devil and for his angels and then lost human beings who reject the grace of God, reject God's provision for sinners. They too will be cast body and soul into that hell. Why? Well, because sin is hateful and God is just. We live in a time where most people must not believe there is anything that is sin and if it is, if there is a belief in sin, it's a belief like this, "I get to determine what sin is and you get to determine what sin is and what may be sin for me, may not be sin for you. What may be right for me, may not be right for you. What may be wrong for me, may not be wrong for you. We all get to make it up ourselves. We all get to determine what is right and wrong and if there is such a thing as sin, it's not that serious. It's just not that serious." Hell says it is. Hell says the reality of hell, the presence of hell, says it is. That sin is in fact something determined not by us but by God and it is hateful to God and it is God's glory, it is God's beauty that he is a God of justice. He promises punishment for sin. Sin deserves death. Every sin ever committed is worthy of the death penalty so far as God is concerned and God does punish sin with death.

This may be lost in the church of our time but do you understand that's a reason for rejoicing? Listen, not rejoicing in the perishing of individual sinners. That grieves us but rejoicing in the justice of God. That's a part of the confidence of the saints. We live our lives now knowing that what is wrong will be made right. The impenitent, those who shake their fists in the face of God and go on in their rebellious ways will answer for what they do. In fact, this may blow our minds but in heaven there is a sweetness to the fact of God's justice. Revelation 14:9, "And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, 'If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.' Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus." You keep enduring. You continue with Christ for the day of justice is coming. The smoke will go up for ever and ever.

How does heaven respond to such a thing? Revelation 19:1, "After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven," I love that by the way, "loud voice." We always want things to quiet. Do you think heaven is going to be quiet? "After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.' Once more they cried out, 'Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.'" The Lord will be praised for his great, unimaginable, inestimable grace but our God will also be praised for his justice.

Second question: who is to be feared in the light of hell? Who is to be feared in light of this reality? God is. God is to be feared. Christ is to be feared. The book of Revelation speaks of the wrath of the lamb who is Jesus. He is God Almighty in human flesh. The God of justice that we've just read about in Revelation 14 and 19 that's Jesus. That's Jesus. That's his nature. That is the divine nature. God is the one to be feared. Jesus said this, Luke 12:5, "But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!" He repeats it. He has the authority, get this, to cast into hell. Have you ever heard someone say, "God doesn't send anybody to hell?" Have you heard Christians say that? "God doesn't send anybody to hell, men send themselves." I know what they mean by that and it's true, men will be fully responsible for their place in hell. Men will one day be judged out of the books and in those books will be revealed what they have done, what they have said, what they have thought and how they have lived. Those who have rejected God's grace will answer based upon their performance, their place in hell they will have deserved. That is true but I want you to know this morning that God punishes. Hell is not purifying. It is punitive. It is punishment that is deserved and God will cast people body and soul into hell and he will be absolutely right and just and glorious and beautiful as he does it. God is to be feared. You talk about hell disappearing, has not fear disappeared as well? Where is the fear of the living God? Is it not a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God? Is that not what Scripture says?

Third question: will God actually punish people in hell? I mean, will he really do this? Is he like perhaps a parent or two in this room, does he just threaten? Does he just threaten or will he really do this? If the Scriptures are to be believed, if Jesus is to be believed, then everyone who dies without trusting in Christ, without trusting in God's way of saving sinners, they will all suffer in hell. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have," what? "Eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world." Jesus came into this world the first time not to bring that condemnation but to provide the way of salvation. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is," what does the Bible say? "Condemned," what's the next word? "Already." You are already under a sentence of condemnation. You think to yourself, "Well, I'll wait and one day there will be a big scale up there and he will put all my good deeds on the one side and all my poor deeds on the other side and

he will weigh them out and I will find out whether I get in or not." No, listen friend, you are already condemned. The verdict has already been given. In fact, according to the standard of God which is perfection, let's put your good deeds on the one side of the scale, there are none, none by that measure.

All that would await you is condemnation but God has this good news for you, "Whoever believes in him, in Jesus is not condemned." Not condemned. "Whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. That is good news. You see, we can't even properly preach the good news because we refuse to preach the bad news. We don't set hell before people, so what is heaven?

Next statement, "But whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Have you believed in his name? Have you believed in his name? This leads to my fourth question this morning: what is God's gracious remedy for hell? God's gracious remedy is salvation in his Son. The wonder of all wonders is that the Judge who could have rightly condemned all humanity, that the Judge who owed and owes nothing to humanity, the God who does not need humanity, the one offended, the one whose honor is infinite, therefore it should not surprise us when the punishment is infinite. That very one, the Judge, made the way for the guilty to be forgiven. The one who will one day judge the living and the dead, laid down his own life on a cross, bore our suffering and our shame, that is, bore the shame and suffering for all of those who will put their faith in him. He died. He had upon himself the wrath of God. Put him in a tomb and three days later he was raised from the dead. He's ascended back to heaven. The good news is being declared that if you will believe in him, you will not perish but you will have everlasting life.

Everlasting life or everlasting death this is set before you. And the way to be saved is Jesus and everlasting life, praise be to our God, everlasting life is not just about length of life, it is about quality of life. We go from darkness to light, from death to life, from bondage to freedom, from estrangement to fellowship, from misery and hopelessness to joy and peace. There is death and there is life. There is death that goes on forever and there is life that goes on forever and Jesus, he is the point of decision. What will you do with him? To believe upon him is not just to intellectually check off a set of facts, it is to give him your life. It is to lose your life to receive him. It is to believe on him in such a way that he will now be your Lord. Have you trusted him? Because that Jesus tells you and me this morning that hell is real.

Let's pray.

Father in heaven, thank you for your gracious warning. Not only did you not have to provide a way of saving us, you didn't have to warn us about where we were all headed. Thank you that Jesus gave his life on a cruel cross, took upon himself a punishment that he did not deserve to set us free forever. I pray for anyone in this room who doesn't know Jesus. O Lord, let your word pierce their heart. Send forth your light. Let their chains fall off. Have them run to your Son and save them. Have mercy upon us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.