

Tough Questions About Hell

Rich Nathan

July 30-31, 2005

Revelation: Looking at Life From the Perspective of Heaven Series

Revelation 14:9-10; 20:10, 15; 22:15

There was a recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* titled “Hold the Fire and Brimstone: Mention of Hell From Pulpits is at an All-Time Low.” Here is how it begins:

Pastor Bill believes in hell, that frightful netherworld where the thermostat is always set on high, where sinners toil for eternity in unspeakable torment. But you would never know it listening to him preach at his South Orange County evangelical church. He never mentions the topic. His flock shows little interest in it. “It isn’t sexy anymore,” said Pastor Bill, pastor of the _____ Church in Orange County.

Someone recently came up to me and said, “I’ve been going to different Bible-believing churches for the last 20 years and I haven’t heard even one complete sermon on hell. Why is that?”

There are, I think, a number of reasons why pastors across America have avoided preaching sermons on hell. In part, it is the same reason why we hear of very few sermons about heaven. If you were to compare sermons from the last 50 years with sermons from the previous several centuries, you would see a decided shift away from sermons about the future or what happens after death. Oh, I know that in many churches there is lots of preaching about the tribulation period and supposed scriptural support for apache helicopters and nuclear warfare and all of that. But even in these churches that regularly paint in extravagant terms what is going to happen in the tribulation period, you hear very little serious discussion regarding heaven and hell.

Now, I think in part, pastors’ motives, including my own motive for rarely touching these subjects is quite understandable. In the first place, lots of pastors share my concern for assisting people in the church to live in the here and now. We want you to be able to live good lives Monday through Saturday so our teaching tends to be more practical and relevant than it would have been 50-100 years ago.

Of course, the great counter argument to what I’ve just said is can a person live a good life Monday to Saturday when they never think about the heaven and hell? Jesus apparently didn’t think so.

A second, perhaps more important reason for avoiding the subject of hell is because of the horrific portrayals of future judgment throughout Christian history.

Pastors were not satisfied with the biblical images of hell that we read in various scriptures, so they began in the 2nd century to offer a more creative picture of hell as a bizarre horror chamber – no excess, no novelty has escaped pastors throughout the centuries. For example, if you read early church sermons about hell, you will discover that some pastors suggested that whatever member of the body sinned, that member would be punished more than any other in hell. So we have blasphemers hanging by their tongues and licentious men hanging by their sexual organs; adulterous women, who entice men with their hair, are strung over boiling mire by their necks or hair. Slanderers were forced to chew their tongues for eternity.

In the 14th century, Dante Alighieri fueled people's speculations with the publication of his *Divine Comedy*.

Dante imagined a place of absolute terror where the damned writhed and screamed. His descriptions of hell come complete with loud wails of sinners boiling in blood, terrified and naked people running from hordes of biting snakes. In Dante's hell, people have to endure thick burning smoke that chars the nostrils. Some remain forever trapped in lead cloaks, the ultimate claustrophobic nightmare.

Many pastors understandably shrink away from this kind of morally repugnant perspective. Unfortunately, we have not offered our congregations an alternative to Dante, or the popular version of hell.

There are less noble reasons why you can go to church for decades and never hear a sermon about hell, even though the subject is mentioned so often in scripture. Churches today are under enormous pressure to be consumer oriented, to be appealing rather than demanding or negative. Church shopping and church hopping has become a way of life in the United States. One out of six adults changes churches every year. One out of five adults regularly rotates among a number of congregations.

So churches are caught between the hard words of scripture and, frankly, market analysis. If you do a door-to-door survey about what people want from a church, people will say:

- I want better parking.
- I want a safe place for my kids.
- I want something positive and uplifting.

So tragically in the face of consumer pressure there has been a failure of nerve. Pastors don't want to be unpopular and to some degree I have been guilty of that as well.

But friends, it is impossible to preach the book of Revelation honestly without dealing with the subject of hell and judgment. This is a negative subject. This is an unpopular subject. This is a subject that affects us personally as we think about loved ones and their salvation. It is also a subject that carries with it tremendous emotional associations from literature we've read, or the misuse of the doctrine of hell, or churches that we may have gone to at some particular time in the past.

But despite its negativity and unpopularity, and all the associated emotional baggage, talking about hell honestly and frankly is unavoidable if you want to be a biblical church. There are few things that I desire more for this church than that our lives and marriages and thoughts and worldviews be formed by this book. I have given my life to try as best I can to communicate this book in a relevant way.

So today as we press forward in this series from Revelation, I've called my talk "Tough Questions About Hell." Let's pray.

Revelation contains several passages about hell. Let me read some of them to you.

Revelation 14:9-10

Rev 14:9 A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand,
Rev 14:10 he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb.

Rev 20:10 And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Rev 20:15 If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Rev 22:15 Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

Now, why should we believe in hell, this church doctrine that is so unpopular, this church doctrine that is so negative, this church doctrine that creates for us so

many personal and emotional problems and is fraught with so much baggage? Why should we believe in hell and not drop the whole doctrine entirely?

One mainline church has virtually done that in its new several hundred page catechism. There is only one single line devoted to hell.

At the World Council of Churches' 4th Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden, it was stated in an official document: "Man is lost because he does not know who he is." Nothing was said about standing under the wrath and judgment of God, certainly nothing was said about hell. This unwillingness to talk about God's judgment brings to mind H. Richard Niebuhr's caustic indictment of 19th century American Christian liberalism: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

Why should we believe in hell anyway?

Peter Kreeft, the great Christian philosopher, who teaches at Boston College, said, "Removing hell is not like removing one stone from a pile and leaving all the others untouched. It is more like removing a vital organ from a body. All the other organs are affected and eventually killed."

You see, if we say there is not hell, then we also have to say that the Bible and the entire church for the last 2000 years have lied. The Bible and the entire church have clearly taught the reality of hell but if the Bible is lying and the church has regularly lied about something so consistently taught, then why should we believe the Bible or the church about anything? If the Bible and the church have gotten it wrong regarding hell, then maybe they've gotten it wrong regarding heaven.

It is not just the Bible and the church that has lied to us, but Jesus himself has lied. Lots of people are surprised at the answer to the question who taught about hell more than anyone else in the Bible? A lot of people think that surely it must have been someone in the Old Testament – maybe Moses or one of the angry prophets. Or maybe it was the apostle Paul in the New Testament because Paul has become the whipping boy for everything that people don't like about the Bible today, whether we are talking about gay rights, or gender roles, or sexual ethics. Maybe it was Paul, that negative Paul, who talked the most about hell in the Bible.

A lot of people are surprised to find that the person who talked more about hell than anyone else in the Bible is Jesus. There are actually very few explicit references to hell in the writings of Paul but in the gospel of Matthew alone there are 18 clear and explicit references to hell. Five of them are in the Sermon on the Mount alone. In fact, when people say, "Well, why do we have to concern ourselves with doctrines like hell? Why can't we just put into practice the Sermon on the Mount," the appropriate response is: Have you ever read the Sermon on

the Mount? Five times in three little chapters, Jesus ties a command in the Sermon on the Mount to the avoidance of hell. Listen to this:

SLIDE – Matthew 5:21-22

Mt 5:21 “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’

Mt 5:22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

SLIDE – Matthew 5:29-30

Mt 5:29 If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

Mt 5:30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

SLIDE – Matthew 7:13-14

Mt 7:13 “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.

Mt 7:14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

SLIDE – Matthew 7:22-23

Mt 7:22 Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’

Mt 7:23 Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

Or how about other sayings of Jesus like:

SLIDE – Luke 12:5

Lk 12:5 But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.

SLIDE – Matthew 13:49

Mt 13:49 This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous

You cannot get rid of hell, unless you are also willing to get rid of Jesus. This unpleasant doctrine is mentioned in dozens of Jesus' statements and parables and warnings.

The apostles also talked about hell. We read the occasional passage in Paul's writings like 2 Thess. 1:9,

SLIDE

2Th 1:9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power

And by the anonymous author of Hebrews 10:26-27

SLIDE

Heb 10:26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left,

Heb 10:27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

Why should you believe in hell?

- Because Jesus taught this doctrine.
- Because the apostles taught this doctrine.
- Because all scripture teaches this doctrine.
- Because the Church for 20 centuries have taught this doctrine.

If we drop hell because it is an unbearable thing for us to believe, then what we are saying is that we Christians can change whatever doctrines we find unbearable or unacceptable. In other words, biblical teaching is negotiable. And if biblical teaching is negotiable, then Christianity is just another human ideology. It is not a divine revelation.

If we toss out what we don't like, then we are saying that Christianity is just a humanly chosen set of ideals. It is not God's Word to us that we have to bow before. Then doctrine becomes like a wax nose on a face that you can twist and turn into any shape you choose.

See, I am afraid that we Christians in the 21st century have fallen into the same trap that other Americans have fallen into. That is the trap of deciding to believe in an idea for a reason other than it is true. More and more, I find Christians agreeing with those who have not made a decision for Christ. Christians will say things like:

- I find it comforting to believe such and such.
- I would like to believe that God would do such and such with people.

- I can't accept this particular perspective because I don't like it.
- What you are saying fits with what I was previously taught; or it doesn't fit.

We have hundreds of reasons for believing. There is really only one completely valid reason for believing anything – and that is because it is true. Not because we like it, dislike it or prefer that it is the case, or find it comforting, horrible, or painful. The fact is, friends, that you and I could discover lots of things to be true that would be very painful to us. For example, we might discover at some point that we have terminal cancer. Or we might discover that a dear friend, whose integrity we have always trusted, is having an affair. We might discover that a business partner of ours is embezzling money. We might find out that we have been disinherited by our parents, or that our brother or sister, who we've always trusted, has been siphoning off money from our parent's estate.

The point is the pain or discomfort that an idea causes is not to be determinant for whether you believe something or not. The reason to believe something is based on whether it is true. Deciding upon whether something is true turns on trusting the authority of those who tell us something. You see, regarding something like hell, there is no scientific experiment to conduct or prove whether or not hell exists. Hell is not a place that you can casually visit. We accept the doctrine of hell based upon our confidence in the authority of those who have taught it.

If you don't believe in Jesus' teaching on hell, why should you believe in Jesus' teaching about anything else? You see, I believe in hell for the same reason that I believe that God is a God of love. I talk with a lot of folks who find it difficult to reconcile the doctrine of hell with a God of love. But I think it is really a fair question to ask a person who struggles reconciling these two things the more fundamental question: Tell me, why do you believe that God is a God of love anyway?

I mean, it is not intuitively obvious that the God who made this world is a God of love. I know that the idea that God is a God of love is a major tenet of 21st century American religion. Everyone who writes a letter to the editor claiming to be a Christian will say, "Well, God is a God of love..." But why do you believe that? How did you ever come up with the idea that God is a God of love?

I mean, if you look at the world, it is not self-evident that the God who is behind all of this is a God of love. As a result of the catastrophe that took place when our first parents sinned, what we observe in the world is tremendous disorder. All parts of creation, from the Antarctic to Arizona, from redwood trees to rutabagas, from Eskimos to Aborigines – all parts of creation have been absolutely jarred out of their original harmonious relationship. Flesh-eating bacteria destroy Christians and non-Christians. The AIDS virus kills young men and women and leave millions of orphans in Africa. Earthquakes occur on the ocean floor creating tsunamis that level hundreds of cities and villages killing

200,000 human beings. 4-year olds are sold for sex and tens of thousands of women are raped in the Darfur Region of the Sudan.

When you look at the brutal facts of a fallen world and fallen nature, it is not self-evident that God is a God of love. There are so many wars and terrorist attacks. The last century has been particularly brutal with genocide after genocide occurring in more frequent fashion. Where is the love?

Even your own conscience would tell you that God is a God of love. Your conscience would tell you that you are condemned. That because you failed, you deserve to be punished.

There is only one way that you would ever know that God is a God of love and that is because Jesus taught you that. Not because of creation. Not because of history. Not because of your conscience. But only because of what Jesus taught and you accept Jesus' authority regarding God. You believe that God is a God of love and Americans believe it simply because Jesus accurately communicates to us about God and the universe.

Jesus said that God was the Father to every repentant child of his and when any person turns to God and runs toward God, God runs toward that person with open arms of pardon and grace. You believe that God is a God of love because you have been instructed in stories like that of the Prodigal Son.

And I believe in hell for the same reason.

Can we reconcile Jesus' teaching about God being a God of love with his teaching about hell? Is the doctrine of hell compatible with God's love?

Let me answer this question in two ways: One is to say that love appeals to freedom. In other words, if God's love is real love, it has to be freely given and God's love has to be freely accepted. If we will not receive God's love, it is not because God is holding himself back, it is because we are holding ourselves back.

CS Lewis, my favorite author, talks about the compatibility of hell with God's love in his famous book, *The Problem Of Pain*. Lewis writes:

In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: "What are you asking God to do?" To wipe out the past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But he has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what he does.

You know, I have spent a lot of time meditating upon the compatibility of hell with God's love. Let me share with you what I have come up with. What if hell was

simply the experience of God's love by a person who hates and rejects God? Think about this with me, friends.

God never stops being loving. God is love. Love is not just an attribute of God that he can switch on and off. Love is the essence of God.

But what if God's love was absolutely distasteful to someone? What if a person hated God? What if praising God, rather than being music to our ears and joy to our hearts was repugnant, painful and irritating in the extreme to an individual. See, I wonder if someone awesomely good like God could be experienced as horrible because of the darkened heart of the person to whom God comes?

Work with me, here. I want you to imagine a woman named Sally, who views another woman at work, Joan, as her chief rival. Sally is absolutely eaten up with envy and animosity and jealousy every time she thinks about Joan. Sally hates Joan. She resents her look. She resents her money. She resents her voice. She resents her promotions at work. She is jealous of her friendships.

Now, imagine if Sally had to sit through an awards banquet for Joan where person after person got up and talked about how incredible Joan was. How Joan was the best employee in the company. Joan was the brightest and the best motivator, the hardest working, the main reason for the success of the company. How do you think Sally would feel listening to Joan getting praised over and over again?

Have you never felt the internal pain of watching praise and success be heaped upon a person you envy? Have you never been rubbed by having someone else get promoted and praised when that person is someone you resent or you are envious of? Now, multiply that pain by an infinite degree. Understand that the essence of sin is that we want to be worshipped. We want our opinions to rule the day. We want to be honored, praised and appreciated. We want to be the center of attention.

The essence of sin is the desire to replace God as the object of other people's worship. What if that desire to be the center of the universe is never repented of? What if the envy of God is nurtured until it utterly consumes a person? What if the thing that causes the pain of hell is forever hearing God praised and worshipped and love when you have no love for God in your heart? Maybe the very thought of listening to God eternally worshipped, or being smothered by God's love and kisses makes your skin crawl.

Can hell be reconciled with God's love? Maybe for some people hell is precisely the experience of God's love. You know, the same sun melts ice and hardens clay. Maybe the same love of God melts some people's hearts and hardens other people's hearts.

See, I think that the issue is not, is hell compatible with God's love. Rather, is hell compatible with human sanity? Only an insane person would reject ultimate joy and happiness forever and trade it in for eternal misery. How could anyone sanely reject their own satisfaction and joy and willingly choose to be miserable? How could a sane person prefer hell to heaven? Hell is not incompatible with God's love, but it is incompatible with human sanity.

But here is an awful truth. We fallen human beings unaided by God's grace are spiritually insane. Our thinking is totally off. That is what the apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:17-18,

SLIDE

Eph 4:17 So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.

Eph 4:18 They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

Every time someone chooses to sin they are trading in joy for misery. It is the law of the universe that sin cannot ultimately satisfy you. You will end up emptier. You will end up more dissatisfied. Sin cannot lead to joy, and yet we choose to sin all the time. In sinning, we are saying, "I am choosing to live an insane existence. I am choosing to rub my life across the grain of the universe. Of course, I will pick up splinters." If you follow this line of reasoning out, we end up in hell. I am choosing misery over joy forever.

Well, what is hell like? Is hell like the pictures painted by Dante in the Divine Comedy? Is hell like the word pictures painted by early writers: people hanging from hooks, being tortured forever by demons?

Here we are faced squarely with the problem of human language to describe what awaits us after death, whether it is positive or negative, when none of us have had any clear experience of life after death. Have you noticed how often the language of the afterlife is loaded with symbols and metaphors? It doesn't mean that heaven or hell is unreal. It just means that the writers of scripture are limited in describing the indescribable by our current human experience and human language.

So, for example, in describing the new heavens and the new earth, we read in Revelation 21:11-14, 21:

SLIDE

Rev 21:11 It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

Rev 21:12 It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Rev 21:13 There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west.

Rev 21:14 The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

SLIDE

Rev 21:21 The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.

Does this sound like a literal description of a place? Do you think that the walls literally have twelve foundations? What does that mean? With names written on them? And that if you drill down in the streets of heaven, you will just have pockets of gold?

Or is the writer attempting to say that the new heavens and the new earth are beyond your wildest imagining and your fondest dreams? To describe the new heavens and the new earth, we need to think about the most beautiful, valuable things on earth and multiply them exponentially and we still can't begin to grasp their beauty.

Well, the same thing is true of hell. I think that when we read the descriptions of hell in the Bible, their purpose is not to give the reader a literal picture of torment, but a symbolic imaging of something that is really horrible. What are the descriptions of hell in the Bible?

First of all, we read about a Lake of Fire. Reverse 20:14-15,

SLIDE

Rev 20:14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

Rev 20:15 If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

And Reverse 21:8,

SLIDE

Rev 21:8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

Now where did this image of a fiery lake of burning sulfur come from? Southwest of Jerusalem was the Valley of Hinnom. The steep gorge was once used to burn children in sacrifice to the Ammonite God Molech. Jeremiah, the prophet, denounced child sacrifice and said that the Hinnom Valley would become the valley of God's judgment, a place of slaughter. Jeremiah 7:32,

SLIDE

Jer 7:32 So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.

As the years passed, people began to burn their garbage and the remains of dead animals in the Valley of Hinnom. They used sulfur, which is the flammable substance that we use in matches and gunpowder. They used sulfur to burn up their garbage and animal remains. Eventually, the Hebrew name Ge-Hinnom, the Canyon of Hinnom, evolved into Gehenna, the Greek word for hell.

So when the Jews talked about punishment in the next life, what image could better describe God's punishment than this burning garbage dump that stunk from sulfur in the smoldering valley next to their city, Gehenna?

How should we think about the Lake of Fire?

But no less of a biblical literalist than Billy Graham, when he commented on the image of fire, once said, "I have often wondered if hell is the terrible burning in our hearts for God, for fellowship with God, a fire we can never quench."

Kenneth Kantzer, the former editor of Christianity Today, said, "The Bible makes it clear that hell is real and that hell is bad. When Jesus spoke of flames, these are most likely figurative warnings based upon the burning garbage dump in Ge-Hinnom."

I don't know how to think about the flames of hell that we read about in scripture. God's wrath is often described as fire. Perhaps the punishment of hell is that the last remnants of our humanity gets burned away and we are just left with our sin. The great writer, CS Lewis, in perhaps the best book I've ever read on heaven and hell, titled *The Great Divorce*, [in fact, if you are looking for a great read this summer, we have copies of *The Great Divorce* in the bookstore. It is a wonderful book], described hell. He says:

The whole difficulty of understanding hell is that the thing to be understood is so Nearly Nothing...It begins with a grumbling mood, and yourself still distinct from it: perhaps criticizing it. And yourself in a dark hour, may will that mood, embrace it. You can repent and come out of it again, but there may come a day when you can do that no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the

mood, or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine.

Maybe the fires of hell describe every bit of our humanity ultimately reduced to ash until all that you have left is our willed sins lasting forever. I don't know.

But I do know that there are various images of hell described, some of them incompatible because these things are designed to stretch us beyond the limits of human language. So we read about hell as "Outer Darkness." Now, it is hard to reconcile a literal continual burning fire and a literal outer darkness in the first place. But these are metaphors that don't require reconciliation.

So we read in Matthew 8:12 these words:

SLIDE

Mt 8:12 But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Likewise in Matthew 22:13 we read:

SLIDE

Mt 22:13 "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

When we think about outer darkness, I think that is a symbolic picture of separation from the light of God. Outer darkness communicates banishment and exclusion from community, community with others and with God. Revelation echoes this banishment, this exclusion, in Revelation 22:14-15,

SLIDE

Rev 22:14 "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.

Rev 22:15 Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

I think about Jesus' words when he said, "Depart from me." Outer darkness means that you are forever shut out from the presence of God. What a horrible eternal fate.

We all understand the pain of being excluded. Some experience that every day. You go to school and you are on the outside of the popular group. You sit by yourself at lunch. A group of people are talking and it is clear that you are not

welcome. The folks in the office all share an inside joke and leave you by yourself.

To be plunged into outer darkness is the result of a life in which people have said to God over and over again, “Leave me alone. Get out of my face, God.” And one day tragically outer darkness implies that God will leave some alone...utterly alone.

And the third image that we read about concerning hell is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Matt. 25:30,

SLIDE

Mt 25:30 And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

I think this phrase is designed to communicate the eternal regret of a person who realizes that they’ve missed the entire purpose for which God created them. Have you ever experienced regret, regret so overwhelming, regret so powerful that you felt like crawling up in a ball and disappearing? Imagine a person who comes to the realization too late in which you say: I spent my whole life investing in what did not ultimately count, and what ultimately won’t last.

Hell, when it is described by the weeping and gnashing of teeth, is the eternal regret of a wasted life.

- I should have invested my life in what mattered, what would last, what would satisfy me. But I didn’t.
- I should have invested my life in a relationship with God. I could have looked to him.
- I should have invested my life in the things that God loves and supports.
- But I wasted my life on what doesn’t matter at all.
- I threw myself into bunch of trivialities.
- I spent myself working at a job where no one really cares about me.
- I should have taken time with the kids.
- I should have invested in my marriage.
- I should have invested in relationships.
- I should have learned how to love.
- I should have learned how to care.

But now all that I’m left with is regrets – just piles and piles of regret. Maybe hell is the pain of regret multiplied infinitely.

Will anyone actually go to hell? Some people believe in hell, but they say it is empty, that God’s love will triumph.

It is true that God wants all to be saved. But not all will be saved. Again, listen to CS Lewis:

If the happiness of the creature lies in (free) self-surrender, no one can make that surrender but himself, though many can help him to make it, and he may refuse. I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully, "All will be saved." But my reason retorts, "Without their will, or with it?" If I say, "Without their will," I at once perceive a contradiction: How can the supreme voluntary act of self-surrender be involuntary? If I say, "With their will," my reason replies, "how, if they will not give in?"

Free will demands the existence of hell. Understand that God offers forgiveness for our sins and eternal life as a consequence, if we accept his offer of forgiveness. But what if we voluntarily choose to reject God's offer? What if we go into eternity in the state that we were in at death? What if the position that we're in at death is the position toward God that we remain in forever?

Should God make us accept his pardon? Should we be forced to love God against our wills? Should we be forced to go to be with God forever when we hate him and don't want him?

GK Chesterton once said that hell is God's great compliment to the reality of human freedom and the dignity of human choice.

Do you understand, friend, that when you sin you are saying "no" to God? And if you say "no" to God long enough – No, God; No, God – it results in no God. People don't understand why hell results from sin, so they think that sin simply means behaving badly. You've been a bad boy, so God says, "I'm going to spank you and send you to hell forever." That's not what sin is. Sin is not just behaving badly. Sin is saying "no" to God. And the way the universe is designed, you are allowed to say "no" to God. But if you do and you persist in saying "no" to God, the most troubling thought is that God is going to respect your no, even when it is an insane no, even when it is a stupid no, even when you do it at the peril of your soul. God takes our choices more seriously than we do.

CS Lewis once said that in the end there are only going to be two kinds of people. Those who say to the Lord, thy will be done; and those to whom God says, "Thy will be done."

Well, Rich, what about those who haven't heard? And this is not just a theoretical question. What about my parents? What about my grandmother who died without professing Christ?

This is an incredibly difficult question. The church historically has said that God in his sovereignty and love might save some who have not explicitly expressed faith in Christ. But we can't assume this in any specific case. We evangelize, assuming that it is through the proclamation of the gospel that God saves people. And we pray assuming that God hears our prayers.

Here is where I dealt with this question, friend, regarding my own ancestors who were Jews, many of whom never had an opportunity to hear the gospel proclaimed clearly and lovingly.

Imagine children playing on a frozen lake. There are signs posted all around saying, "Danger, Thin Ice." I don't have to know with 100% certainty that a child will fall in, to scream at them to get off the ice. I do what I can to warn and invite and maybe in the grace and justice and sovereignty of God, the ice is thicker than some people think. Maybe the Bible has posted all kinds of warnings to encourage people like you and me to tell the world, "Listen, here is what it is going to take to be saved." The simple fact is we do not know the population of heaven and hell. And Jesus never answered the question: Are there few who will be saved. Instead, he simply addressed us in Luke 13:24,

SLIDE

Lk 13:24 "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.

The issue of hell is not addressed to the statistician in us who wants to figure out the percentage of folks who end up where. The issue of hell is not addressed to our detached curiosity. The issue of hell is addressed directly to you, to me and to our wills.

Let me finish with this. To whom do we preach about hell? I believe that hell is primarily addressed in the Bible to religious people in the church.

Shirley Guthrie makes this astute comment: "To whom did Jesus address his gracious words of invitation and promise? To people who were obviously guilty—dishonest tax collectors, prostitutes, political and social outcasts, rejected by respectable people. And to whom did he address his sternest warnings of hell-fire and eternal misery? He almost never mentioned hell except when he spoke to the scribes and Pharisees—the very moral, very religious, complacent, church-going people of his day."

Friends, I am afraid in the Christian church in America right now we have churches filled with people who have calloused consciences for whom God's warnings and threats about hell have no impact at all.

Listen to me, friends, I am mostly Calvinistic in my theology. I believe in Philippians 1:6 as much as anyone where it says,

SLIDE

"He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

I believe that the genuinely converted Christian in whom the miracle of the born again experience has been worked in their soul, I believe as much as anyone that that person's name is in the book of life and that they will never be excluded from citizenship in heaven.

But I am deeply troubled that this doctrine that is sometimes called the doctrine of eternal security has been perverted by callused professors of Christ who think that because of sometime in the past they raised their hands at a meeting or signed a card or made some kind of decision, they can live in rebellion against God and still merrily walk into heaven.

Do you not ever wonder to whom the warning passages in the Bible are addressed? When the Bible says,

SLIDE

"Do not be deceived, neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

How is it that we think if we live in unbroken sexual immorality that we will inherit the kingdom of God? Don't you wonder sometimes, even shudder to think that you may be one of the ones who may be deceived? When Jesus says in Matthew 7,

SLIDE

"Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my father in heaven."

How can we look up to heaven and say to God, "Get out of my face. I don't care that you tell me that you hate divorce. I am going to go ahead and get a divorce anyway, but I know I am saved."? Friends, I tell you that kind of Christianity sends a shudder up my spine. And I would not want to hinge my salvation on the person who rebelliously shakes their fist at God in a repeated fashion and says, "It is OK because at some time in the past, I signed a card. I raised my hand. I went forward."

I am afraid the problem in the church right now is many, many who have callused consciences and have never applied the warning passages of the Bible to themselves. Those who have never done what the apostle Paul tells us to do to test ourselves to see whether indeed we are in the faith.

- Are you soft towards God?
- Are you running toward him or away from him?
- Are you walking in repentance and brokenness or in rebellion and hardness?
- What is the general direction of your life?

I am deeply concerned about a religious culture that we find in America today and in this church, with people who never contemplate their own possible damnation. Where the question never arises about whether someone is just a false professor of faith or a real possessor of the miracle of God. Where people don't take His warning seriously.

I am deeply concerned, as a pastor, as I sit in my office with person after person who looks me in the eye and say, "I really don't care what God says. I am getting a divorce and I know I am on my way to heaven. I don't have to forgive so and so who hurt me." I say to you, Christian counselor, Christian leader, do you ever add the possibility of going to Hell to your arsenal of counsel? Do you ever say to someone, "If you continue in this addictive pattern like Jesus said in Matthew 5, or Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6, you could end up in Hell?"

The proper use of Hell is to have us good church people dangle for awhile if we have a callused conscience so that we flee into the arms of a loving, merciful God, and repent of running from Him.

Let me read to you again from C.S. Lewis' *The Problem With Pain*. Lewis says:

In all of our discussions on hell, we should keep steadily before our eyes the possible damnation not of our enemy or of our friends, but of ourselves...This chapter is not about your wife, your son, nor about Judas Iscariot, no Nero, or Hitler. It is about you and me.

Let's pray.

Tough Questions About Hell

Rich Nathan

July 30-31, 2005

Revelation: Looking at Life From the Perspective of Heaven Series

Revelation 14:9-10; 20:10, 15; 22:15

- I. Why Don't We Hear More About Hell?**
- II. Why Believe In Hell?**
- III. Is Hell Compatible With God's Love?**
- IV. What Is Hell Like?**
 - A. The Limits Of Language
 - B. Images Of Hell
 - 1. The Lake Of Fire
 - 2. Outer Darkness
 - 3. Weeping And Gnashing Of Teeth
- V. Will Anyone Actually Go To Hell?**
- VI. What About Those Who Haven't Heard?**
- VII. Who Needs To Hear About Hell?**