

HELL!

Jonathan Gallagher

Hell on the Street

“Hell!” the man shouted, waving his arms and glaring wildly.

“Hell?” I queried.

“Yes, hell! That’s your trouble. Too many people forget all about hell. The Church has gone soft. We need to get back to the truth with plenty of hell fire.”

I must’ve looked puzzled because he explained some more:

“Listen. All this lovey-dovey do-what-you-like religion doesn’t do any good. Tell people all about the real horrors of endless torment and then you’ll see results! Just imagine what it’ll be like to be burned alive for ever and ever, screaming in incredible pain...with no rest, even for a moment...with all the devils of hell tearing at you with red-hot pliers...”

I could almost hear the fire crackle and see the flames rage. Almost smell the searing flesh...Ugh!

Profanity

Hell. For most a profanity rather than a point of doctrine-- yet still living on as an unpleasant thought there at the back of the mind. Is that really where I’ll end up if I’m bad? Will I live this eternal nightmare when I die? What should I do about hell?

This street preacher I met certainly knew. Dressed in a threadbare suit he was shouting his message of doom at everyone who passed by. And if you think that old-fashioned “hellfire preaching” isn’t effective any more, you should’ve seen those people faces.

“Repent or be damned for eternity!” he cried. “Don’t you fear the wrath of God and his terrible punishment that will be poured out without mercy on all those who do evil? Hell stares each one of you in the face. God commands you to repent or face his anger in hell for ever...”

Scarifying!

Effective--in scaring people! It doesn’t take much to imagine the hideous horrors of hell. God’s fearsome punishment that will last for ever? No wonder men have gone mad, terrified at the thought... But is it right? Is this picture of hell from God, or is it the product of man’s imagination? What is the truth about hell?

I wondered about the pavement preacher's motives. I asked him:

"Tell me, why is hell so important to you? I don't hear you preaching about other things? What do you do it for?"

He stared at me, eyes blazing. "Hell is the only thing that matters. These sinners are going down into hell, and I have to tell them. Warn them. If they don't repent, they'll be punished by God in the fiery flames of hell for all eternity. They're doomed. I've got to let them know before it's too late..."

"But what about God?" I asked. "Is he really like that--ready to burn and torture people for ever? What does that say about God?"

But he wasn't ready to debate the issue. Muttering on about God's wrath and vengeance he went over to a group of teenage girls to "give them the message". They tittered and ran off, laughing at "this weirdo". I wondered what they really thought...

So where does that leave us? Was he right? What is hell, what is it for, what does it say about God?

WHAT IS HELL?

Reminds me of an invitation sent out by a church for one of its meetings:

WHAT AND WHERE IS HELL?

Find out this Friday at 7pm

A warm welcome awaits you

A warm welcome?! Maybe not the best of advertising psychology... But so many people are confused and unsure about hell. So what is hell? To find the answers we must go back to the words of Jesus, rather than rely on the imaginings of poets or painters or even preachers!

Jesus on Hell

What did Jesus claim to be? God. His mission was to make God known [1] and to lead people back to him. He demonstrated what God was truly like against the lies the Devil had told about him. Through his life and work he proved the real nature of God which climaxed in his death on the Cross, the most complete and powerful demonstration that God is love.

So what did Jesus say about hell? He used two words to describe hell: hades and Gehenna. Hades simply means "the lower regions" which were thought by the Greeks to be the place of the dead. In fact the term can be simply translated "depths" as in: "*And*

you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths [hades]". [2]

Hades was equivalent to the Old Testament word "sheol" which is often translated "grave". No thought here of unending torture in terrifying flames. Jesus' idea of hell is clearly linked with what he said about death--a sleep in which there is no consciousness [3].

Gehenna is a place name. It refers to the Hinnom valley outside Jerusalem which was the rubbish tip! Here all the city's junk was brought to be buried or burned. There's nothing in this picture of "hell" to suggest eternal torment by demons--only a place where rubbish was brought to be totally disposed of. The fires burned everything up until they were completely destroyed. So too in the final rubbish heap of the world--all will be consumed. Jesus spoke of both "soul and body" being destroyed in hell. [4]

So while the End does bring the total elimination of the wicked, the hell of Jesus and the Bible is not the traditional doctrine of endless torture.

Objections

Here come the objectors! By now some will be jumping up and down in fury saying

--that this is unbiblical and heretical,

--that such a view removes God's punishment so people won't want to be saved,

--that heaven wouldn't be so attractive without the thought of hell.

On the contrary, they say

--that hellfire is eternal,

--that the immortal souls of the wicked will be tortured for all eternity,

--that knowing the fate of the wicked in hell will encourages the righteous,

and so on.

Search the Bible through and you'll find no descriptions of the torments of hell as commonly believed. No demons with red-hot pincers doing God's work of punishment (strange that the Devil agrees to act as God's torturer!) No God gleefully dangling us over the flames of hell, ready to drop us at any moment. None of this. [See "Pictures of Torture"]

Eternal?

But to take a couple of objected points. Isn't the punishment and fire "everlasting" [5]? Yes, that's what the Bible says. But not everlasting in its duration, only in its results. The people of Sodom were destroyed for their terrible wickedness. Fire rained down on them. They were totally destroyed, burned to ashes. And then the fire went out--it's not burning today. The Bible speaks of that fire as "eternal"--because of its eternal consequences: "Remember Sodom and Gomorrah...they paid the penalty in eternal fire, and example for all to see." [6]. An example to us of hell--which will destroy the wicked completely, not burn them forever and ever.

Immortal souls?

Those who believe in immortal souls have a problem here! For if the soul is immortal, and the wicked have such souls too, then even God's end-time fire won't destroy them. So you end up with an ever-burning, torturing hell. But the Bible says that "*The soul that sins shall die*"; "*God only has immortality*". [7] The Bible knows nothing of an immortal soul flying away at death either to heaven or hell, or some place in between! Belief in the complete eradication of the wicked fits in perfectly with the Bible message in which God makes all things new. [8]

Imagine the perfect universe of the future that still has a place of evil, torture, agony and pain! How could that be possible? The end-time fire of destruction does not burn forever, it merely purifies and cleanses. "*That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.*" [9]

WHAT IS HELL FOR?

If all this is true (and check it out for yourself in the Bible), then where did the lurid and terrifying pictures of hell come from? Why should people invent such horrible scenes? One main reason is some peoples' desire to force others to accept God. That's what hellfire preaching is all about: scaring people to God! Something like:

*God dangles you like spiders over the roaring flames. He could drop you at any moment. So get on his right side!

*Imagine all that pain for all eternity--you can avoid all that if you do what God says.

*Hell is God's big stick with which he beats people into submission to himself.

*If you're evil, God will get his revenge on you. So watch out!

*God is harsh and full of wrath, and he will delight in making you suffer forever if you disobey him.

The Hound of Hell. A terrifying beast that haunts your nightmares and make you serve God out of appalling fear. A giant Doberman that God keeps at his side to chase you to him like poor baaing sheep.

Force

So often that's what hell is for--to force people, to make them submit, to terrify into obedience. And it does work--many people have come to church and worshipped God in fear of eternal torment if they disobeyed.

Trouble is that's not what God wants. His priests, preachers and pastors may often have thought otherwise. But a relationship based on fear strikes at the heart of the gospel--which is good news, not bad. And hell is the worst of the bad news! For what does the common view of hell tell us about this God?

WHAT DOES HELL SAY ABOUT GOD?

Hell says God is cruel and sadistic.

Hell says God is unjust.

Hell says God is vengeful and vindictive.

And a lot more beside. But that'll do for starters.

Even we in our imperfect system of justice believe the punishment should fit the crime. What justice is there in making any punishment continue for ever for a crimes committed over an average of seventy years? So what about all the flames and torments which some so readily (and gladly, it seems!) describe? Are they carried out by a sane and humane being?

What kind of choice does this God give us? Do as I say or I'll fearfully torment you forever? Does that sound like free choice? More like Hobson's choice...

And what about God's very nature? He came and died to show us who he really was, what he was really like--the true God of love. Hell negates all that. It proves that the devil is right when he makes God out to be an autocratic tyrant who is unfair, arbitrary, harsh and cruel.

Demonic

The picture of hell that men describe is demonic. The Devil is the true author of hell. But believing that God is behind such evil torture, many have turned away in horror and disgust at such a Being who is so much worse than us ourselves! [See "What Hell has Done"].

For although some may be scared to God through hellfire preaching, many more are turned against such an appalling God. Hell is not disciplining punishment--because no one can repent. Hell is vindictive sadism on a divine scale.

SO WHAT IS THE TRUTH?

If the common description of hell could be proved from the Bible, then we would have to accept it as true. But I for one could never accept such a God. Thankfully this hell is a gross distortion and has no Biblical support so we can safely put it out of our minds. Not merely because it is so distasteful, but because it is not true.

So what is the truth about God and this hell? The wicked will have their final end, to be sure. Sin and evil will be totally eradicated. But not in endless torment, nor in ever-burning flames, nor in a hell to which you go immediately at death.

If you are evil, have lived apart from God, have rejected him and his offers of love and healing from sin, then when you die you will sleep death's sleep. Then you will be raised up in the second resurrection [10]. And once more you will take your stand alongside all the others who have chosen to be enemies of God. In one last act of defiance and hostility you will be part of that hostile army who go up to attack God. And then, like Sodom and Gomorrah, fire will rain down from heaven and completely destroy you. ["Fire came down from heaven and devoured them" [11]. Devoured--in other words, ate them all up until nothing was left.] This is hell, the final lake of fire.

And what will God be doing as all these people die? Exulting, cheering, enjoying the spectacle like some Roman at the Coliseum circus watching the Christians being torn to pieces by the lions?

Or will he still be saying as he always has:

"How can I give you up? How can I let you go?". "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent tot you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" [12]

In the end God simply unveils his glory, and all that is sinful and evil will not be able to stand it. "The glory of Him that is love will destroy them". And the wicked will experience what hell is all about:

Total separation from God who is life, and complete non-existence. Gone forever as God weeps for his lost children.

Sin Pays a Wage

The end of the wicked is still a warning. God would not be love if he didn't let us know the consequences of our sinful actions. But we do not face a wrathful executioner, but a loving Father who waits for all who will to come to him. Those who refuse he will not

force, but the wage that sin pays is death [13], evil has its own eternal results. What you sow is what you reap.

So what do you want to reap? The glories of your Father's presence, or final and complete separation from him? Happiness and real joy now as God's child, or tragedy and sadness as an enemy hostile to God? The welcome into heaven and the wonder of eternity with God, or that total loss and separation from him which is the true meaning of hell?

A Story

Jesus told a story about five wise girls and five foolish ones. [14]. The five wise girls had taken the time to prepare, to be ready for the expected bridegroom. The foolish ones hadn't bothered, "they couldn't care less". And when they went along, the door was shut. Excluded. "Cast out".

You know what it's like to have a door shut in your face. A definite sign that you can't come in, that you can't have a part in what's happening the other side of the door!

That's what God sadly has to do at the end. Those who have never wanted him simply can't come in. Not because God doesn't want them, but because they have lived so out of harmony with God, so totally opposed to him that they would never "fit in". Their ideas, desires, and thoughts are completely opposite to God and those that love him. They simply have no place there. And surely that is the saddest thing of all--that you could have had all God offers, and you turned him down, forever!

Which side of the door do you stand? Is your future with God, or without him? Will you hear God's laughter as he welcomes you in, or his tears as he gives you up? It's your choice, and you are choosing now.

References

1. John 1:18; 14:7.
2. Matthew 11:23 NIV
3. John 11:11-14
4. Matthew 10:28
5. Matthew 25:46,41.
6. Jude 7 NEB

7. Ezekiel 18:20; 1 Timothy 6:16.
8. Revelation 21:5
9. 2 Peter 3:12,13 NIV
10. Revelation 20:5
11. Revelation 20:9 NIV
12. Hosea 11:8 Moffatt; Luke 13:34 NIV.
13. Romans 6:23.
14. Matthew 25:1-13.

Some Quotes on Hell:

“I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly human can believe in everlasting punishment... I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hellfire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty.” Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian*.

“It is the Augustinian theory [traditional view of hell] which endangers faith, and has made shipwreck of faith in the case of multitudes, by representing God as a Being of boundless injustice, caprice (sic), and cruelty.” Henry Constable, *Duration and Nature of Final Punishment*, 166.

“The idea that a good God would send people to a burning hell is utterly damnable to me--the ravings of insanity, superstition gone to seed! I don't want anything to do with such a God.” Luther Burbank.

“[Hell] makes man an eternal victim and God an eternal fiend. It is the one infinite horror.... Beyond this Christian dogma, savagery cannot go.” Robert Ingersoll.

“An eternally burning hell preached from the pulpit, and kept before the people, does injustice to the benevolent character of God. It presents Him as the veriest tyrant of the universe. This widespread dogma has turned thousands to universalism, infidelity, and atheism.” Ellen White, *Testimonies*, 1:344-5.

“It were better to have no opinion of God at all than such an opinion as is unworthy of him.” Francis Bacon. [Hell is such an opinion!]

“If the love of God will not induce the rebel to yield, the terrors of an eternal hell will not drive him to repentance.” Ellen White, Testimonies, 1:39,40.

PICTURES OF TORTURE

“Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace

And rest can never dwell, hope never comes

That comes to all, but torture without end.”

--John Milton, Paradise Lost.

“The God who holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire.... He will have no compassion upon you, he will not forbear the executions of his wrath, or in the least lighten his hand; there shall be no moderation or mercy...” -- Jonathan Edwards, Sermon: “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”.

“Conscience, judgement, memory, all tortured.... Thine heart beating high with fever, thy pulse rattling at an enormous rate in agony, thy limbs cracking like the martyrs in the fire and yet unburnt, thyself put in a vessel of hot oil, pained yet coming out undestroyed, all thy veins becoming a road for the hot feet of pain to travel on, every nerve a string on which the devil shall ever play his diabolical tune...” --Charles Spurgeon, Sermon No. 66.

“I see a brimstone sea of boiling fire,

And fiends, with knotted whips of flaming wire,

Torturing poor souls, that gnash their teeth in vain,

And gnaw their flame-tormented tongues in pain.”

--Francis Quarles, Emblems.

“Look into this prison. In the middle of it there is a boy, a young man, He is silent; despair is upon him. He stands straight up. His eyes are burning like two burning coals. Two long flames come out of his ears. His breathing is difficult. Sometimes he opens his mouth and breath of a blazing fire rolls out of it. But listen! there is a sound just like that

of a kettle boiling. Is it really a kettle which is boiling? No; then what is it? Hear what it is. The blood is boiling in the scalded veins of that boy. The brain is boiling and bubbling in his head. The marrow is boiling in his bones! --J. Furniss, Tracts for Spiritual Reading.

“In order that nothing be wanting to the happiness of the blessed in heaven, a perfect view is granted them of the torment of the damned!” Thomas Aquinas.

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