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Whatever Happened to Hell?

by Roger Schoenhals

I remember hearing a sermon on hell. I was a child, and it so frightened me that I wanted to be a Christian just to escape going to that awful place. That was thirty years ago.

Things have changed today. A sermon on hell is about as rare as a wild buffalo whistling "Dixie." We hear about God's love, discipleship, spiritual gifts, social ministries, moral development, and so forth. But the wrath of God? Nothing!

One reason is the pendulum. In our reaction to the excesses and distortions of the past, we have swung over to the other side where we feel comfortable only with positive themes like love and spiritual fulfillment. The "good life" brand of Christianity has little room for God's holiness, the wretchedness of sin, everlasting judgment, sorrow, repentance, and righteous living.

Another reason for neglect of teaching on the wrath and judgment of God is our desire to make converts. We tend to dangle the goodies in front of them and tell them the stuff about hell later.

And then there is the contemporary emphasis on determinism -you really can't help being the way you are. Its great exponent, B. F. Skinner, has done much to relieve us of our guilt. He has taught us that we are only social animals acting in conditioned ways. So, there's no such thing as personal sin, accountability, judgment, or hell.

One of the strongest influences leading us away from a serious view of hell is the philosophy of humanism. Man is good. At his best, he would never let a fellow human being suffer. And since God is better than man, He would certainly not allow any of His creatures to suffer eternally in hell! This line of reasoning presented itself in a TV news special on being “born again.” Bill Moyers zeroed in on the question of hell with a Christian teenager: “I know people who are moral and good and who do not claim to be born again. How could a good God allow them to go to hell?”

The young man shrugged his shoulders and answered, “That’s what the Bible says.” And so you see, now we come to the basic issue – the Bible. Do we believe it? Is it the Word of God?

The pendulum, easy believism, determinism, humanism – these are all peripheral. At the core is a breakdown of Biblical authority. The less authority people ascribe to the Scripture, the less seriously people take the teachings on hell.

We can play our games with the Bible, sidestepping and distorting passages that conflict with contemporary thought. We can try to tunnel under, go over, or steer around references that offend our human sensitivities. We can ignore, pretend, and even cast aside. But does that change anything? The Word of God remains true. Forever.

The church’s calling is not to judge and distort the Word; it is to believe it and to declare it to a crooked and perverse generation. The *entire* Word. Even the parts about hell.

Jesus believed in hell. Get a Bible and look up the references. **Matthew 5:22; Matthew 8:12; Matthew 13:42; Matthew 24:51; Matthew 25:41,46; Mark 9:43-47; Luke 12:5; Luke 16:23-24; John 5:29.** Jesus didn’t mince words. He talked more about hell than about heaven.

Hell was prepared for the devil and his angels. It was never intended for man. We sentence ourselves to hell by going against God’s plan for our salvation. He is **“not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).**

Hell is horrible. The way we throw that word around today only dilutes our understanding of the actual conditions. Even the analogies in Scripture (lake of fire, bottomless pit, gnashing teeth) do injustice to the reality of being cut off from all that is good and true.

Hell is eternal. The teaching of a temporary punishment is a perversion of the truth. Jesus clearly declared that hell is final and forever. I’m not *calling* for a return to the old days when preachers, like Jonathan Edwards, dangled their listeners over the fiery

lake of hell. And I'm not *urging* for a reduction of our teaching and preaching on God's love. I'm *pleading* for balance and for the whole picture: love which includes the necessary dimension of His holy wrath.

What happens when the church takes seriously the Biblical teaching on hell? A soberness fills our thinking and praying. A sense of urgency grips us. We proclaim salvation earnestly. Recognizing the holy and just nature of God, we show greater concern for righteous living. We flee from evil and from all that is impure. We desire to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And, most important, when we take seriously the Biblical teaching on hell, we gain a more clear understanding of the love of God. It's only when we see the awfulness of sin and how much God hates it, that we fall more deeply in love with the pure Son of God who took upon Himself the sins of the whole world that we might be saved from guilt and delivered from the wrath of a holy God. God's love is hollow without hell.

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Everything Jesus Taught About Hell

By Herbert Lockyer

From the record of our Lord's ministry among human beings, we discover that some of the most solemn utterances about the eternal woe of the lost fell from the lips of Him who died that people might not perish. No matter how men may try to do away with hell, it is still in existence and was a grim reality to Jesus who constantly warned his hearers of its terrors. It is true that some of His descriptions of the place of final punishment may be figurative, but still, they indicate a dreadful reality. The words He used all imply utter and hopeless ruin and reveal how candid He was when speaking of the eternal destiny of those rejecting Him and His witness. It was the Saviour – who came as the personification of divine love – that spoke of:

“The broad way that leadeth to destruction” (Matthew 7:13)

“Outer darkness” (Matthew 8:12; Matthew 22:13; Matthew 25:30)

“Unquenchable fire” (Mark 9:43-44)

“Wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:42,50)

“The whole body cast into hell” (Matthew 5:29-30). “Everlasting fire” (Matthew 25:41, 46)

Yet, speaking so faithfully of the reality, the fearfulness, and the eternity of God’s just retribution, Jesus always displayed His matchless love and His unlimited grace – for it was the contemplation of the sinner’s doom that caused His tears. Can you not hear the sob of unwanted love in His plea: “How often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not” (Luke 13:34)?

It is not generally realized that Jesus spoke more frequently of the place of woe than of the abode of eternal peace. His most graphic and detailed representation of the place, originally prepared for the devil and his angels, is the illustration He used for the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man is tormented in hell’s flame, not because he was rich, but because his soul’s deepest interests were neglected. He prays in agony for a drop of water to cool his tongue, but his suffering and despair are increased tenfold by the sight of the felicity of the beggar whom he had despised and neglected, now at a heavenly banquet – and also by the fact that a great gulf *is fixed* between paradise and perdition. There is no purgatory in which the rich man could cleanse himself of his sins and errors, and then recline on Abraham’s bosom. Hell, as we understand it from the teaching of Jesus, means *eternal* separation from God.

What must be borne in mind is that God is not willing that any should perish but that *all* should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9) and therefore, never *sends* sinners to hell. The eternal punishment of the wicked is not arbitrarily imposed by God but is the inevitable outcome of sin itself. The path to hell is the sinner’s own self-chosen course, being left by God to reap the full and dire consequences of sin. Having persistently separated themselves from God, sinners who die in their sin, banish themselves from His presence and abandon themselves to reap the full harvest of their own evil character and of their rejection of Calvary’s provision for their sin. God wills that all persons should be saved (I Timothy 2:4), but to the wicked, Jesus was obliged to say: “Ye will not come to me that ye might have life” (John 5:40; see also John 3:19). Although Jesus was the Son of God “with power,” He *never compelled* submission. The Lord’s invitation is, “If any man will.” Because He died that all persons might be forgiven all their sin, Jesus gives us not *a* chance, but *every* chance to accept His gift of eternal life.

The terribleness of the sayings of Jesus about hell are all the greater when we remember that there is no hint of the termination of the sinner’s doom. Why did Jesus not safeguard His words from misapprehension, if behind them, there lay an assurance of restoration and mercy after the grave? The fact is that when Jesus used the word

“eternal” – whether of eternal life or of eternal damnation – He meant a finality of state. Sometimes when people fail to reconcile the Saviour’s love with His teaching on hell – they drop one of the concepts – but usually it is the teaching on hell which is dropped. Yet He who taught that “God so loved the world,” also declared that if human beings fail to believe in His bountiful provision for their sin, then they must “perish” – which means not annihilation , but eternal banishment from His presence (John 3:16).

It is our obligation to preach the *woes* of Scripture as well as the *blesseds*, but when it comes to warning sinners to “flee the wrath to come,” may it be with tears in our voices. This was how Paul preached (**Philippians 3:18**). May compassion of heart be ours as we warn the sinner of the peril of being forever lost!

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The Wicked Shall Be Turned Into Hell

By Bishop J. C. Ryle

Let others hold their peace about hell if they will. I dare not do so. I see it plainly in Scripture and I must speak of it. I fear that thousands are on that broad road that leads to hell, and I would arouse them to a sense of the peril before them. What would you say of the person who saw his neighbor’s house in danger of being burned down, but never raised the cry of “Fire”? Can it be in bad taste to speak of hell? It is a matter of charity to warn people of their danger. It is my duty to declare all the counsel of God. If I never spoke of hell, I should think I had kept back something that was profitable and should look on myself as an accomplice of the devil.

Beware of new and strange doctrines about hell and the eternity of punishment. Beware of manufacturing a God of your own – a God who is all love, but not holy – a God who has a heaven for everybody, but a hell for none – a God who can show good and bad to be side for side in time but will make no distinction between good and bad in eternity. Such a God is an idol of your own – as true an idol as was ever molded out of brass or clay. The imagination of your own mind has made him. He is not the God of the Bible, and aside from the God of the Bible, there is no God at all. Your heaven would be no heaven at all. A heaven containing all sorts of characters mixed together indiscriminately, would be miserable discord indeed. There would be little difference between it and hell. Ah, reader, there is a hell! Take heed lest you find it out too late.

Beware of forming fanciful theories of your own, and then trying to make the Bible square with them. Beware of making selections from the Bible to suit your taste – refusing like a spoiled child whatever you think is bitter – and seizing whatever you think is sweet. What is all this but taking Jehoiakim’s penknife and cutting God’s Word to pieces? What does it amount to but telling God that you, a poor, short-lived worm, know what is good for the human being, better than He does? This will not do. You must take the Bible as it is. You must read it and believe it all. You must come to the reading of Scripture in the spirit of a little child. Never say, “I believe this verse for I like it; I receive this for I can understand it; I refuse that for I cannot reconcile it with my views.” **“Nay, but O man, who art thou that repliest against God?” (Romans 9:20).** Surely it were better to say about every portion of the Word of God, “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.”

If people would consistently accept every part of the Bible, they would never try to throw overboard the doctrine of eternal punishment of the wicked. Jesus says, **“And these shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal.” (Matthew 25:46).**