

THE END #2: "WHAT IS HELL?"

Review: God's justice, judgment and wrath are motivated by his eternal love. They expose our sin and punish sin so that we can be restored to His love. But there also is a final judgment that ultimately gives to people what they have chosen on this earth, based on their Relationship to God and their deeds that flow from that relationship.

- Many wonder: "How can a God who loves people send so many people to eternal torment?" It seems to not fit with how God revealed himself in Jesus.
- The O.T. does not mention "hell." The Hebrew word "sheol" is used to describe "the place of the dead" or "the grave." All go there. (Psalm 89:48)
- There is hardly any mention in the Old Testament of a soul that lives forever (hint in Psalm 16:17) – nor are there descriptions of different destinations for the good and the wicked. God was teaching Israel about the kind of life they should live here and now, not about achieving life after death.
- Between the O.T. and Jesus, the idea of a place of punishment for the wicked began to form in the general culture and within Judaism.
- "hell" appears 13 times in Today's NIV Bible.
 - ♦ 6 occur in one repeated teaching about better to be thrown in the "fire of hell" than to have our body offend us. (Mat. 5:28-30, 18:9, Mark 9:42-47); ♦ Mat. 5:22; ♦ Mat. 23:15 & 33; ♦ Mat. 10:28 "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Repeated in Luke 12:5); ♦ James 3:6 (evil of the tongue); ♦ 2 Peter 2:4 (Gk. "tartarus" – where sinning angels await fire)
 - ♦ Summary: Only used for human judgment in 4 teachings in whole Bible.
- Our English word "hell" in our Bibles is a translation of the biblical Greek word, "Gehenna." And Gehenna is the Greek form of the Hebrew "ge-hinnom", which means "valley of Hinnom".
 - ♦ The Valley of Hinnom was outside the southwest wall of Jerusalem. Years ago Jews burned child sacrifices to the idol Molech. Later the valley was used to burn garbage and human waste with sulfur, and bury criminals and animals. It was the city dump and smelled terrible.
 - ♦ Jesus' hearers would not have thought he was referring to a literal place somewhere else. He was talking about the stinking Valley of Hinnom.
 - ♦ Jesus, as a Jewish prophet, used word pictures: "if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out." We are called to be "salt" of the earth, "light" of the world, and "sheep" of his fold. If we have faith we can tell a mountain to be thrown into the sea and it will be done.
 - ♦ Other metaphors to describe existence for those who reject God: "burning fire" & "utter darkness." These can't both be literal! Also, "lake of fire", "gnashing of teeth," and "beaten with blows."
 - ♦ It seems strange that a *loving* God who tells *us* to love our enemies would cause people to suffer emotional anguish forever. And it seems strange that a *just* God could punish people's finite sin by infinite pain.

- ➔ *It's biblically reasonable to see the Valley of Hinnom ("hell") as just one metaphor along with many other metaphors that serve as warnings.*
- What is the **reality** they're speaking about? ► 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might."
 - ♦ **Separation from God** – separation from all his goodness and glory.
- What happens to people who are separated from God? Some conclude that they just don't know. Others....
- An alternative: Complete death; annihilation.(John Stott; Michael Green)
 - 2 Thess. 1:9 "...everlasting destruction"; ► Mat. 10:28 "be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." ► John 3:16 "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." ► Romans 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death." (Note: The apostle Paul never mentions hell, but he does mention death.) ► 2 Peter 3:7 where Peter speaks of the "judgment and destruction of the ungodly."
 - ♦ This view understands the Greek word for "everlasting" to mean "final" in this context – not going on and on forever. ♦ It understands the judgment metaphor of fire to mean consuming, not torturing. ♦ It believes the soul is mortal – it will die some day. Only God is immortal – but to those who love him, he will give the gift of immortality (1 Cor. 15:53). So if the soul is mortal, it's reasonable that it would die – annihilation.
- Luke 16:19-31 - The story of Lazarus and the rich man.
 - ♦ Most scholars see this as a parable, not a true story.
 - ♦ What is Jesus teaching in this parable?
 - (1) God's Kingdom is upside down – many of those who appear to be blessed and religious on earth will be left out, while many of the outcasts and poor will be blessed. (2) You reap what you sow. (3) God had given the Jewish people enough revelation for them to love God, and more information or miracles would not help them.
 - ♦ Reasons to believe Jesus' comments about the afterlife in this parable are metaphors and not facts: (1) These men skipped the Final Judgment and went directly to punishment and reward. (2) Abraham's side is never mentioned elsewhere as the focus of heaven. And where is everybody else? And God? (3) The rich man is on fire but having a conversation! (4) They can see each other (and talk) across the gulf.

Summary Applications

1. There are **consequences** to our response to God and how we live in this life. Rejecting God results in separation and death. Don't mess with it!
2. Those who end up in eternal separation from God will **get what they want**. God will tell them "Thy will be done." Galatians 6:8 - "Those who sow to please their sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; those who sow to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."
3. God is **love**. He will not torture people forever in fire. And his judgment is consistent with love – so both we and unbelievers can come freely to him without confusion.