

55 Mark 9:42-50

Hell

Text

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. 43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 48 ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ 49 For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Introduction

This is now the third part of a three part series on this passage. The first message was apologetic in nature. We examined textual criticism and textual transmission to answer the question, "How did we get this Bible that we hold in our hands, and how can I have confidence in it. Last week we expounded the text which is the aim of any apologetic. The desire is not to convert through apologetic. Only the gospel will convert. Apologetic merely assist in answering genuine concerns that a person may have. Jesus spoke some hard words on sin. He drove home the seriousness of sin and the necessity of doing all that we can to eliminate it from ourselves. He followed that by urging his followers to be salty.

This week I am going to examine the doctrine of Hell more specifically. I want to first look at the objections to hell and the alternatives proposed. I'll then present the biblical doctrine of Hell. And I'll conclude with some applications.

Objections & Alternatives

Let me start off with a quote by Douglas Moo:

Universalism is on the rise in our day. The global village has brought people of different religious persuasions together to an unprecedented degree. Other religions are no longer strange teachings held by people far away in another country; they are the beliefs of people right next door. And as people get to know one another at this level, the claim that Christianity is the only way to salvation begins to sound arrogant. Added to the cultural mix is the post-modern tendency to question absolute truth. Multi-culturalism combines

with postmodernism to elevate tolerance to the chief of virtues - and hell is the ultimate intolerant doctrine.

"I can't believe that God would send someone to hell just for believing different."

"Will I really go to Hell for something I simply cannot believe? How is this free will?"

There is a basic misunderstanding here as to what "believe" means. From a biblical point of view, faith, or belief involves three things: notitia, assensus, and fiducia. These are Latin terms describing what is involved in the biblical concept of faith. The first one is notitia, this is the content of the faith. Faith cannot just exist, it has to have content, or an object. Faith in what? That is notitia. For Christianity notia is that mankind is sinful, God is holy and just, that Jesus lived a perfect life and died a substitutionary death such that those whom he represents will be saved from the punishment that a just God must dish out. You may not accept it as true, but that is the content of the Christian faith that scripture sets forth.

Second, assensus is the conviction that this content is true. This is where everyone seems to be getting hung up. Since this was not a post asking for evidence so much as an explanation, I will not add much here except to say that if one rejects Christianity it will not be because of intellectual reasons.

Third is notitia. This is a resting or a trusting in something. Hence, a person may understand the content, believe that it is true but not ever entrust themselves to it. A person may believe that an elevator will hold them but never step on it to find out. These three things taken together is what constitutes biblical faith.

Now consider this: Suppose that a man, convicted of murder is running from the law. He gets on a boat to escape, gets drunk, kills the captain and then falls overboard. The crew still tries to save this man by throwing him a life preserver. This murderous drunk refuses to believe that a preserver has been thrown. He mockingly calls back "I can't believe that you would make me drown for not believing that there is a life preserver?" "You're saying that I am going to die just because I believe something different?"

Do you sense how silly that is? You are going to hell for your sins. A lifetime of sinning against an infinitely valuable God and a lifetime of rebelling against the High King, that is what you will be punished. And yes, if you further spurn the atonement that was made then that failure to believe in Jesus will ensure that you receive justice instead of mercy.

Hell exists because of our rebellion against God. It is not our belief but our crimes that place us in hell. A just judge will not let the guilty go free. Sin must be punished. Yet because of his love and grace God sent his Son to bear that punishment for those who believe. If we refuse to rest in Christ, then we have spurned the one thing that could have saved us. It is like the drunk who would not grab the life preserver, or the prisoner on death row that will not accept a presidential pardon.

We have answered a couple of the most common objections I have heard, but there are some additional ones that underlay even these objections. First, there is the objection that eternal punishment does not seem to square with a holy God. Second, an eternal punishment seems disproportionate to the sins that we commit in these short 100 years. These objections drive the ones we have just considered, and they spawn some alternatives to hell that we will now consider.

Annihilationism

This is the view that the people who do not believe in Christ will simply cease to exist when they die. Their punishment is that their spiritual life ends when their physical life ends. For support they will go to passages like:

Phil 3:19, Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

1 Thess 5:3 While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

2 Pet 3:7 But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

Universalism

Universalism is the belief that everybody will get to heaven. This has a couple of different forms to it. One teaches that everybody will go to heaven right away, and the other form teaches that everyone will get to heaven eventually. This second variety has a kind of purgatory notion to it. Some people will go to hell for a short time, but once they have paid their dues, they get to come to heaven. For support, universalists will go to passages like:

Rom 5:18 Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.

John 1:29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

Are you noticing that the universalists rely on the same texts that the Arminians do? I don't think that is a fact they have really appropriated.

Before I get to a positive presentation of the doctrine of hell, allow me to make three quick points:

First, the term for destruction that the annihilationists rely on does not mean what they think it means.

Matthew 26:8 And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste?"

Luke 15:4 What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?

Luke 15:24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

The sheep did not cease to exist. The prodigal son did not cease to exist. They were both lost, not annihilated. The perfume did not cease to exist when it was poured on Jesus' feet. This observation coupled with the proper doctrine of hell that we will soon examine shut the door on annihilationism.

Second, I answer the universalist passages the same way I answer the Arminian passages. Look at the context - both textually and culturally. In Romans 5 the parallel was drawn between Adam and Jesus. Both were representatives. All those who Adam represented fell in him. All those who

Christ represented are justified in him. The context is federal headship. So who does Christ represent? Who are his people? Believers.

In John 1, we need to understand something of the culture. The Jews and Gentiles did not mix. The Jews were God's chosen people, the Gentiles were dogs. The Samaritans were right out. Salvation is only for the Jews. No other people group would be saved. Any atonement made was made for Israel, not anyone else. So how do you convey the notion that God's salvation crosses all ethnic boundaries? You say things like, "Not for the Jews only, but for the whole world." This does not mean every single person that has ever lived. It means that God's people will now extend beyond the ethnic/geographical boundaries of Israel.

Third, I want to address the claim that hell is too much punishment for too little sin. I have two answers to this. First, we conveniently bypass the value of the offended in our assessment. What kind of punishment do you get for murdering a mosquito? Nothing. What kind of punishment do you get for murdering a dog? Depending on the circumstances, maybe a fine for animal cruelty. What kind of punishment can you get for murdering a person? You can get the death penalty. Why the different severity of punishments? They are all the same crime - the taking of innocent life. The severity of the punishment has to do with the value of the being against whom the crime was committed. Now what is the punishment due for a crime against an infinitely valuable Being?

Second, we wrongly assume that one in hell, all sin will cease. I don't know why that is. We seem to think that people will only sin while they live on earth, but once they pass into hell they will be perfectly sanctified. Either that, or they believe that it is ok to sin in hell. It was wrong to blaspheme God on earth, but it is ok to do it in hell. Even the Arminian will grant that mankind will never turn to God in repentance in his natural state, outside of prevenient grace. A totally depraved man that no longer receives the grace of God will continue to be totally depraved. Thus we have a lifetime of sins against an infinitely valuable Being, and we have these sins continue for eternity, why should the punishment not be anything less than eternal? How is that justice?

The Doctrine

Already, Not Yet: We live in an inaugurated eschatology. We, as believers, already experience many of the blessings of being in Christ. That will reach its consummated and intensified form at the second coming. And unbelievers currently experience the anger of God which will be consummated and intensified at the second coming. The death, wrath, destruction, condemnation, punishment, curse and distress that unbelievers currently experience will continue and be intensified in the afterlife. Both believers and unbelievers live in the already and the not yet.

Eternal in Duration

Against annihilationism, scripture sets forth hell as a place of eternal punishment.

Matthew 25:41, "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.'"

Matthew 25:46, "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Matthew 3:12, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Mark 9:43-48, "And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 48 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'"

2 Thessalonians 1:9, "They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,"

Revelation 14:11, "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."

Revelation 20:10, "and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

Some have suggested that the fire is eternal, but people will eventually be consumed and therefore cease to exist. That seems odd to me. In the first place, I wonder why God would create an eternal fire and undying worm if they were only going to be useful for a little while? After everybody has paid their price, why would God keep the fire burning throughout the rest of eternity? Secondly, even if God did so create an eternal fire, why did Christ and the apostles refer to it when speaking to people? Rather than simply saying fire, they say eternal fire. This has the understandable effect of conveying an eternal rather than a temporal punishment. Saying you are going to cast someone into a 10' deep pit means that they will fall for a short time. A 100' pit indicates that they will fall for a longer time. A bottomless pit conveys the notion of forever falling. My point is simply that to use the word eternal in describing a temporary event is a bit misleading.

Third, the fire and the worm are metaphors. I don't expect that there will actually be fire and worms in hell. They are found in highly symbolic genres. They are metaphors to describe the outpouring of wrath. Since this is the case, how can a metaphor be eternal? If it refers to the outpouring of God's wrath, then how can God continue to pour out his wrath on objects that have long since ceased to exist? Does this not compromise the character of God? Is God just angry without cause? Does this anger just build up and he needs to continually vent it even if there are no longer any objects of wrath? It just does not make sense.

Conscious Existence

Others have suggested a kind of soul sleep. They grant that hell exists and that it is eternal, but that people basically sleep through the whole thing. Against the idea of soul sleep, scripture sets forth hell as a place where people will be conscious.

Mt 25:30 And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Matthew 25:46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

2 Thessalonians 1:9, "They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,"

Revelation 14:11, "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."

Revelation 20:10 "and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

All of these passages strongly militate against the notion of soul sleep. People are awake for this whole thing.

The Love of God

So far we have looked at some of the more common objections about and alternatives to hell. We have found them wanting and have set forth a positive case of what hell is in all of its horrors. But in the midst of all these dark clouds of wrath there shines the love of the Creator in all its brilliance. Hell is what God endured in order to redeem.

There is a Jars of Clay song that talks about God who loves "more abundant than the tears of a world embracing every heartache." My sin, which I have committed this morning merits an eternal punishment. The sin that I will commit tomorrow will merit an eternal punishment. My entire life is filled with sin and he bore it all. Your life is filled with sin, and if you believe in him, then Christ has born all of your sin and all the punishment that is due your sin. On Christ has been laid all the sins of all his people. And while the physical death of Christ was unimaginably painful, it was when Jesus felt the Father withdraw from him that the real punishment began. And in that time of separation, the Father poured out his wrath, in all its blazing holiness, not upon us, but upon his Son! Oh what manner of love is this?

In a book titled *Hope Has Its Reasons*, Becky Pippert says, "Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference." A parent hates to see his child ravaged by self-destructive behavior.

Application

Asking how we can apply this doctrine may seem highly absurd. It is like asking, "How can I apply this warning that the bridge is out?" Well stopping the car is one obvious point of application. What shall we learn and apply of this doctrine of hell? It is a horrible place, do not go there! Embrace Christ. Repent of your sin and fall on him for your salvation. Why would you die? What rational reason can be given for choosing an eternity in hell rather than an eternity in heaven?

The doctrine of hell should remove any obstacles we have toward forgiving other people. The first blow to an unforgiving heart should be the cross. When you realize what Jesus has done for you, how could you possibly withhold forgiveness toward others? The second blow to an unforgiving heart is the doctrine of hell. You may have been wronged, but it is not yours to lord it over that person. You may have been sinned against, but that sin was either punished in Jesus on the cross, or it will be required of the person in hell. The fact that justice has, or will be done, coupled with the immeasurable debt that you have been forgiven, should do away with excuses for forgiving other people.

Finally, if this doctrine still causes some discomfort for us, I hope that is because we are reflecting the love of God that he has placed within us. God takes no pleasure in the destruction of the wicked. Nor should we. On the one hand we may rejoice that justice was upheld, but we may also grieve over the necessity of it. How can this not affect how we see unbelievers? Oh that we would see them through the eyes of God.