

THE REALITIES OF HELL

In the beginning of John's ministry, we learn the main theme of his teaching: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." He calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers and asks who warned them to flee from the wrath to come? What wrath?

Matthew 3:10-12 *Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 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."*

Do you know who speaks about hell how more than anyone else? You'd probably guess Paul, since the majority of the NT is penned by him, but you'd be wrong. In fact, Paul never uses the term for hell (Gehenna). He gets into condemnation. He talks about not entering the Kingdom of heaven. He talks about God's wrath being stored up and poured out. But, for whatever reason, doesn't get into describing hell.

Jesus is speaks about it, by far, more than anyone else. In fact, the first time we read the term (hell) is in Jesus' sermon on the mount when warning about hating our brother or lustful thoughts in our hearts:

- **Matthew 5:22** *But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.*
- **Matthew 5:29–30** *If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.*
- *Gehenna is the Greek term translated "hell" in these passages. It refers to the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom. "It is first mentioned in Josh. 15:8. It had been the place where the idolatrous Jews burned their children alive to*

Moloch and Baal. A particular part of the valley was called Tophet, or the "fire-stove," where the children were burned." Easton, M. G. (1893). In Easton's Bible dictionary. New York: Harper & Brothers.

- "That 'the valley of Hinnom' became the technical designation for the place of final punishment was due to two causes. In the first place the valley had been the seat of the idolatrous worship of Molech, to whom children were immolated by fire (2 Ch 28:3; 33:6). Secondly, on account of these practices the place was defiled by King Josiah (2 K 23:10), and became in consequence associated in prophecy with the judgment to be visited upon the people (Jer 7:32)." Vos, G. (1915). Gehenna. In J. Orr, J. L. Nuelson, E. Y. Mullins, & M. O. Evans (Eds.), The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia (Vol. 1–5, p. 1183). Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company.
- "The word Gehenna [the Greek contraction of Hinnom] was never used in the time of Christ in any other sense than to denote the place of future punishment." Easton, M. G. (1893). In Easton's Bible dictionary. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- It was located to the southwest outside of Jerusalem's walls, but the idea that it referred to a continual dump site that was always burning during Jesus' time (while tempting to believe) was first recorded from a commentary on Psalm 27 by Rabbi David Kimhi, dating from around 1200 AD. So, it's safer to stick to what we know for sure. It was an area associated with past idol worships where men offered their sons by fire to Moloch and Baal.

Jesus will talk about hell in several ways. We'll not look at every passage (it would be repetitive), but enough to have a well rounded view.

I. **Matthew 13:41-42** (Parable of Weeds) The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

- A. Fiery furnace. Weeping and gnashing of teeth.
- B. We've already seen the tie to fire and hell in Matthew 5:22 "fire of hell." I think it's safe to say, when someone thinks of hell, the first image is that of fire.

C. Is fire a metaphor? Or is it like "street of gold?" It's a fair question. Not everyone who asks that is trying to get around the reality of hell. However, if it is, you must remember it's a metaphor for something real. Jesus said, "I am the door." He isn't literally a door, but then again He is a spiritual door. The spiritual door is much greater than a physical one, no? There's a horrible reality behind the term if it's not literal. This shouldn't leave you with any comfort.

1. It was in the beginning of my senior year that two planes flew into the Twin Towers in New York. There are so many tragic stories. It was a horrific scene. But the most shocking of them all were those trapped so high above the ground. All hope was gone, and for many, it became obvious that only two options were left. Burn alive in a 1000 degree fire or jump. You know those Towers were over 1,300 ft tall. It was a 10 second fall. 125 - 200 mph depending if you went headfirst. It's estimated that at least 200 jumped that day. That's how much we fear fire. If it's not a literal fire, then God is trying to make a point to humans using human terms. Make no mistake - Jesus knew what He was saying and the effect it would have. His disciples needed to understand that the kingdom of heaven was serious business. This would help evaluate themselves, but also give fuel to their mission of helping others enter this kingdom.

II. **Matthew 25:41, 46** (Sheep and Goats) "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' . . . And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

A. Hell is described as an eternal fire. Eternal punishment. Prepared for the devil and his angels.

B. Brethren, it's true that God's wrath will be poured out on those who reject him.

1. **Romans 2:5** But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

2. **Romans 2:8-9** but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek,

C. But that's not what God wants. We serve a God . . .

1. **1 Timothy 2:4** who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

2. Hell wasn't prepared for us, but He'll send us there.

D. God will judge us, but in a real sense we place ourselves in hell.

1. C.S. Lewis also said, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: Those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in hell choose it . . . the door to hell is locked on the inside."

2. We have to accept responsibility.

E. And it's eternal.

1. Many want to believe hell is real, but once you're sent there you are destroyed, never to be again. One passage should be sufficient to see how destruction is to be understood.

2. **1 Corinthians 5:5** you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

a) This man didn't cease to be. The hope is that his worldly ways, found in Satan's realm, would ruin him and he'd hopefully return (perhaps what **2 Corinthians 2:5-11** is all about). Like Hymenaeus and Alexander, who were handed over to Satan by Paul, "that they may learn not to blaspheme." **1 Timothy 1:20**

3. Just look at the verse 46 of the original text. Both the unrighteous and righteous go into something eternal. One is life and the other is punishment. If one goes on, so does the other. If one is eternal, so is the other.

4. I won't pretend to totally understand this. I don't understand eternity. This is difficult. Everything I know has an end. I don't understand the concept of eternal punishment. There are examples we could discuss in order to explain this principle, but I'm going to level with you: I don't totally understand and appreciate eternal punishment. I have to believe it and accept it by faith.

a) Will there be "degrees of hell?" Several other passages raise some interesting questions, but no matter what it's not good.

b) At the end of the day, it's a matter of faith. Perhaps we should use caution before thinking, "Surely God wouldn't do that. God

shouldn't be represented in such a way." Remember, Jesus is God and represented Himself in such a way. He felt comfortable doing so. I assume one should be as perplexed about God's wrath as He is His love - sending His Son to die for us all. Truth be told - that doesn't make anymore sense to so many.

III. **Matthew 25:30** (Parable of the Talents) And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (Side note: *Insert from Luke's account in 19:22: "I will condemn you with your own words" helps explain parable.*)

A. Weeping and gnashing of teeth. Outer darkness.

1. Light and Darkness have always played an important part in the bible.
 - a) **1 John 1:5-6** *This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.*
 2. **2 Thessalonians 1:8-9** *in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,*
- a) Other passages speak of this darkness where angels who have sinned and false teachers go (**2 Peter 2:4, 17; Jude 13**), but this will do. Brethren, this means the absence of goodness. One of the most terrifying realities of hell is that it's left to a people who served themselves, but now they exist in a realm where no good exists. People become worse and worse on earth. Does that happen in hell? Does it continue to spiral out of control because God has "let us go?"

B. **Away from the presence of the Lord.**

1. The greatest tragedy of hell is the reality of not being with the Lord. Being separated from Him. If given the option to live according to God's law and seeing Him in the end vs. being free from God's law, but being annihilated at death, which would you chose? I fear what the answer would be for so who profess to follow Him.
 - a) Brethren, the greatest joy of heaven is being with God. We have got to get beyond the idea of "There's a God who's trying to give you a second chance, but if you don't hurry up and get your act together,

you're goin' to the bad place." We've got to value being with the Lord. I'm not saying that punishment isn't part of the process, but is it meant to be the whole focus?

(1) Our mindset needs to get past: what will I get in heaven or what's going to happen to me in hell? People who go to hell do so because they served themselves. We've got to stop doing that. We've got to serve Him. That will make heaven so precious, because we'll finally get to Him.

C. What this means for me today?

1. **Sharing the Gospel.** Does this put sharing the gospel with the lost into perspective? God is patient and loving. We know His desire. We know the reality of most people. Let's get busy.
2. **Anxiety & Relationships.** Does it help prioritize our worries? Does it help reprioritize your life?
 - a) No one should end up there. No one should have to experience an eternity of regret, "If only!" "I wish I would have . . ."
 - b) God wants to be with you and you with all the saved. Let's prioritize these relationships.
3. **Thankful for Light.** We may complain about this world, but it's nothing compared to an existence without any light. That light comes from God and is appreciated by those who shine it. We are benefitting from it all the time. It's so easy to take for granted.
4. **Appreciating Prayer.** Hell is the one place where God is not present. He hears me. He answers. I think I've taken prayer for granted. Can you imagine a reality where you cry out and He'll never hear or answer . . . ever. A time where God has moved on as if He is no more? Let's cry out to Him at a time when He can be reached.