

STUDIES IN ESCHATOLOGY No. 16

October 26, 2003

“Hell: No. 1”

Text: Genesis 19:23-29

- v. 28 The Dead Sea area, where these cities were, still reeks of sulfur fumes and asphalt deposits are still to be found. Precisely what sort of physical eruption occurred no one can say for sure. The Dead Sea sits atop the Great Rift, so some form of earthquake is not unlikely and if that released gases (such as hydrogen sulfide) the entire mass of air over the area could easily have been set afire. [von Rad, *Genesis*, 220]

We are in the concluding section of this series of studies in the Bible’s doctrine of the future, or biblical eschatology. We are now dealing with “The Four Last Things,” though, as I mentioned last time, we will not deal with the first of the four last things, viz. death. Last time we took up the subject of the Last Judgment, that final assessment of every human life and assignment of its proper place in the world to come that the Lord Jesus will conduct when he comes again. Tonight we begin our consideration of the fate of those who are not saved and who are condemned in that Last Judgment to hell, to destruction, to everlasting ruin, to God’s wrath – which are some of the ways their fate is described in the Bible.

This is an immense subject and always highly controversial, and still more nowadays. It is also a point of Christian belief and confession where believers have become unsure of themselves, hesitant, and even embarrassed by their doctrine. Some prominent evangelicals have abandoned historic Christian orthodoxy at this point under pressure from the culture and, I have no doubt, we will see more of this as the years pass. For these reasons it is time for us to consider the Bible’s doctrine of divine wrath and eternal punishment in a comprehensive way. So I propose to take advantage of the opportunity afforded me by this series on the Bible’s doctrine of the future to take some time on this particular subject of hell. Tonight we will do nothing more than simply introduce the subject.

According to David Wells, one of our most astute observers of modern culture and its influences on Christian theology, there are two reasons, in particular, for the pressure nowadays being exerted on the Christian doctrine of hell. *First*, there is the secularization of modern culture, the principle effect of which is not unbelief in God *per se* as a marginalizing of God, pushing his reality and the truth of his Word to the periphery of life. A faith that is secularized does not necessarily deny the truth about God, it simply makes that truth inconsequential, tame, and harmless. Over time, however, the result of this is that this truth becomes harder and harder to take seriously. It is more and more alien to the patterns of our thought and the expectations of our world. When in the most recent poll, whose results have been reported quite widely in the last few days, 71% of Americans believe that there is such a place as hell but only one-half of one percent expect to go there when they die, it is clear that, no matter people’s beliefs, hardly anyone is taking the reality of damnation seriously.

Second, our culture has made a shibboleth of relativism, the reduction of truth to personal preference. In our country nowadays no objection will be made to anyone’s holding of any

particular private belief, even belief in hell. We believe, after all, in the liberty to think one's own thoughts and hold one's own convictions. We are Americans after all! If neo-Nazis can march in Skokie, Illinois, Christians can believe in hell. However, that tolerance does not extend to the person who believes that his belief is *true*, true in the old-fashioned sense, true not only for himself for everyone else as well and then has the temerity to say so. Since, according to every survey, a majority of Americans does not take belief in hell seriously, orthodox Christians who do are a minority and are expected to behave as such.

For most of 20 centuries the Christian church has confessed, however sadly, that God's Word teaches and requires us to believe that the impenitent will be punished in the world to come. If we ask why these doctrines are now becoming so unbelievable the answer is that it is not the truth that has changed but we ourselves. As Wells puts it:

“Is it that new exegetical discoveries now cast doubt upon what the church has always believed? Are there new archeological finds? Is it that the church has simply misread the Bible and done so consistently over so long a period of time? No, these truths today have become awkward and disconcerting to hold not because of new light from the Bible but because of new darkness from the culture.” [In Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, x]

Now, to be sure, cultural objections to the Christian doctrine of eternal punishment did not first surface in the 20th century. Tertullian, in the 3rd century, wrote, “We get ourselves laughed at for proclaiming that [Christ] will one day judge the world.” Hell has had its detractors from the beginning. But in our time there is a coalescing of cultural forces that make divine wrath more and more implausible to the modern mind.

For generations now, a sermon on the punishments of hell or the threat of punishment in the world to come has been known as a “fire and brimstone” sermon. The imagery of fire and brimstone originates in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, described as God's judgment of those wicked cities in Genesis 19. The Bible itself uses that destruction as a picture of the divine wrath that will befall the unbelieving and impenitent in the world to come. Depending upon one's religious background and point of view, one thinks fire and brimstone sermons good or bad. More and more nowadays, however, such sermons are viewed, in polite culture, as relics of a bygone era, a time when credulous and simple people were easily influenced by wild-eyed pulpитеers who virtually entertained them with grotesque descriptions of the torments of the damned. Mark Twain, in the 19th century, poked scornful fun at such sermons and, in our own day, Gary Larson has made that picture of hell a source of condescending amusement in many of his *Far Side* cartoons. Larson can joke about hell over and over again because he doesn't think anyone will find it offensive because no one takes the subject seriously. In that, alas, he is all too right.

James Joyce, in his autobiographical novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, tells of the schoolboy, Stephen, attending a school retreat directed by an earnest Jesuit priest named Father Arnall. Stephen himself is particularly susceptible to religious impressions because he has just fallen into grave sin after being accosted by a prostitute on a Dublin street. A thoughtful boy, he was alarmed by a sense of his own wickedness. Father Arnall announces that his sermons are to be on the Four Last Things: death, judgment, hell, and heaven. But when he comes to hell, his

enthusiasm gets the better of him. His descriptions of the sufferings of the damned are so lurid, his account of the tortures prepared for them so ingenious that it becomes clear to the boys that Father Arnall is obsessed with the subject. In fact, when the time comes for the final sermon, which was to be on the subject of heaven, Father Arnall cannot break away from his favorite subject and preaches once again on the pains of hell. Joyce's account is a cunningly patronizing dismissal of the church's doctrine. He turns the preaching of it into burlesque, a kind of comic entertainment to be enjoyed by anyone smart enough to know that such ideas should not be taken seriously. Hell is made to look ridiculous, the passion of twisted folk who find it a pleasure to contemplate someone else's pain.

Well, if priests and ministers making too lurid descriptions of the sufferings of the damned was supposedly a problem in the Protestant church of Mark Twain's day and the Irish Roman Catholic church of James Joyce's day (something I find hard to believe, by the way), if hellfire and damnation were preached too often and too enthusiastically in those days, no one can say we face a similar problem today. The contemporary church, even the evangelical church, can hardly be accused of having an obsession with damnation. It hardly mentions the idea and then only in the most delicate manner. There is, within evangelicalism, considerably more discussion as to whether we should continue to believe the doctrine than proclamation of the doctrine to the world.

Now, you are perhaps aware that the phrase "fire and brimstone" comes from the King James' Bible's rendering of v. 24: "the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven." Brimstone is another word for sulfur. So brimstone and fire mean some kind of fiery sulphurous explosion, some kind of burning sulfur, as the NIV has it. "Fire and brimstone" became attached to the Bible's doctrine of divine retribution and the punishment of the wicked because Holy Scripture itself employs the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as an image, a picture of the divine judgment and punishment of the wicked.

You have references to the destruction of these cities many times in the OT prophets as an illustration of what awaits the wicked in the judgment of God. So God says to Israel in Amos 4:11-12:

"I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. You were like a burning stick snatched from the fire, yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord. Therefore this is what I will do to you, Israel, and because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel."

In the New Testament also, the devastation of Sodom and Gomorrah serves to prefigure the divine vengeance upon sinners. Jude writes, for example, "...Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." In Jude's day, even more than ours, this scene of sulfurous devastation in the Valley of the Dead Sea, still provided living evidence of divine judgment and a warning of the reality of the eternal fires of hell.

The connection between the destruction of Sodom and the eternal punishment of the wicked is made also when there is no explicit mention of Sodom or Gomorrah but the same images are

used to convey the horror of the divine punishment visited upon the wicked. For example, in Revelation 14:10, we read that those who align themselves with evil in the world will drink the wine of God's fury and will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb.

Now, we should be clear that this is an image, a picture, a figure of divine judgment, not a literal description. Those cities, of course, were simply destroyed, obliterated. But the manner of their end is used in the Bible to emphasize the ferocity and finality of the divine vengeance against sin and sinners. We have to admit that sometimes this has not been well understood by Christians or by Christian ministers who have taken these various figures the Bible uses to describe Hell as though they amounted to the description in a travel agent's brochure of the Inferno. We will have more to say about this in coming weeks, but, taking the Bible together, all that it says about these judgments and the punishments of those outside of Christ, we learn not to take these figures literally. The Bible in fact often likens other historical judgments of peoples to that of Sodom and Gomorrah which we know had nothing to do with fire and brimstone, though they were swift and catastrophic.

For example, hell is described in the Bible both as outer darkness and as eternal fire. But fire gives light and seems to be incompatible with darkness. Or, we read of the Lake of Fire prepared for the Devil and his angels, but it does not seem that angels, being spirits and not having bodies, can be acted upon by physical forces, such as water or fire. Images such as fire and brimstone are designed to make us dread hell, to teach us that its punishments are severe. They are not intended to teach us exactly what those punishments will be.

Francis Turretin, the Swiss Reformed theologian of the 17th century, who has sometimes been called "the Protestant Thomas Aquinas" cautions his readers, "But what [hell] is or in what infernal punishments consist, it is not easy to define" [Loc. 20, Qu. 7, Parag. 4]. On the basis of arguments like those I mentioned, Turretin preferred to think of such things as fire and brimstone as metaphorical, physical pictures of mental and spiritual suffering, what he calls "severe tortures of conscience and desperation."

In a famous statement in one of his sermons, John Donne [IV, 6] reminds us that all of these physical images are little or nothing compared to the great issue of the presence or absence of God. Spiritually minded people appreciate that this alone is the great punishment. If you have God in full measure -- which is what heaven means -- you have perfect joy, if God departs completely from you -- which is the fate of those in hell -- nothing else can give you peace, joy, or satisfaction. Donne put it this way:

"When all is done, the hell of hells, the torment of torments, is the everlasting absence of God, and the everlasting impossibility of returning to his presence...to fall out of the hands of the living God, is a horror beyond our expression, beyond our imagination.... What Tophet is not Paradise, what Brimstone is not Amber, what gnashing is not a comfort, what gnawing of the worme is not a tickling, what torment is not a marriage bed to this damnation, to be secluded eternally, eternally, eternally from the sight of God?"

And that is true, but sinful human beings have a great difficulty knowing and appreciating the truth of it. They are at present far more worried by physical losses than spiritual ones, they do not grasp that all that they enjoy in life here, they enjoy simply because God has not yet totally deserted them, they are all for the present and for the physical and temporal, and so the Lord speaks to them in language they can grasp and understand. And they can grasp this and appreciate this language of fire and brimstone; they can grasp it today in our so-called advanced and sophisticated society as surely as they ever could in ages past. For, when you think of it, there has never been a time in all of human history when the sense and the power and the imagery of fire and brimstone were more accessible to men than today. We have, in fact, in the 20th and early 21st centuries taken fire and brimstone to an altogether new and higher level!

What is clear, however, is that the prospect of punishment in the world to come is very real in the Bible, however alien, distant, and hard to believe it may seem for most people in the West today. In future Sunday evenings we will elaborate the biblical evidence, discuss the various objections made to the Bible's doctrine, and offer a defense. We will also talk about the practical importance of faith in the punishment of the impenitent and unbelieving.

One point we will make again and again all along the way is that the problem of hell is not simply a problem of the future. Hell is with us already and everyone knows it. Intimations of the punishment of sin are all around us. The cry that it be punished and justice be done is very often on the lips of great multitudes of human beings. And the sentimentality to which we are all prone – the tendency to think that things must be as we wish them to be – that wishful thinking about man's behavior, about his control of the future, that hope that things will turn out acceptably have been shattered as often, as violently, as thoroughly in recent history as ever in the history of man. Images of hell have been provided us in the modern world more terrifying, more realistic than anything that Dante could find in his fertile imagination. The death camps of the Second World War, the fire bombings of German cities and of Tokyo and Hiroshima – heat so severe that the water in the rivers that ran through the cities actually boiled – and the destruction of Mt. St. Helens and of 9/11. The world rings with intimations of judgment. If this is God's world, as it is, it rings with the announcement of doom. Sodom and Gomorrah have nothing on us! The citizens of those cities were not expecting the destruction that fell upon them so suddenly. They had no intimation of doom, but it visited them nonetheless.

So on 9/11. Think back to those thousands of people who got up that morning as they always did, got dressed, had breakfast, read their newspapers, and ran to catch the train or the subway. They poured into those office buildings as they did every morning. Took the express elevators, walked into that familiar office space, sat down at their desk, and picked up where they had left off the night before. At no point, up to the moment the planes struck, did they imagine that they were moments from a terrifying end to their lives, that the plans they made, the hopes they had, the expectations for that afternoon or evening, for the days to come, would not, would never be fulfilled.

So it was at Sodom and the Bible says in that sudden and unexpected destruction *we are being shown the future*, at least the future of those whose sins are not covered by the blood and the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

There is much to be said to correct the view of hell and judgment that many have, including many Christians. The Bible's doctrine is complex and sophisticated. But, there is also much to be said for it. We will not apologize for hell; there are far too many reasons for taking it in deadly earnest. And, quite apart from the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ himself, there is far too much evidence for it all around us, all the time.