

STUDIES IN ESCHATOLOGY No. 17
November 9, 2003
Hell, No. 2

TEXT: Read 2 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Review

We introduced our study of the destiny of the lost last time by pointing out that the very idea of damnation, of hell has become an alien thought in modern Western culture. It is sometimes poked fun of but rarely spoken about seriously. It has even fallen out of favor as a subject for the evangelical pulpit. People still seem to think, for some reason, that Christian pulpits give congregations a steady diet of what they don't want to hear, but it is not so and has never been so as a general rule. Ministers are as inclined as other people to tailor their remarks to the tastes of those to whom they are speaking. They worry about giving offense; they worry about driving people away; and in American evangelical culture, where the number of people who listen to you is ruthlessly applied as the criterion of success or failure, they worry that sermons that deal in unpopular or uncomfortable subjects will ruin them in the ministry. The fact is, the history of Christian preaching has been as much a history of ministers accommodating their message to the culture as it has been a history of confronting the culture with the truth of God. If the British Prime Minister, William Gladstone, the devout High-Church Anglican, could say of eternal punishment in his day, "It seems to be relegated at present to the far off corners of the Christian mind, and there to sleep in deep shadow," how much more could the same be said of our day. [Vernon Grounds, "The Final State of the Wicked," *JETS* 24/3 (1981) 211]

Now, to be sure, we still find in our culture the frequent use of "damn" and "hell" as expletives to intensify one's speech and it is very likely that this is an unconscious witness to the reality of damnation. That reality is acknowledged in the depths of the heart while at the same time being denied in the reasonings of the mind. After all, why do people, including vast numbers of generally irreligious people, make God's name and Christ's name an expletive. Why are those names so often on the lips of people, except, as Dr. Schaeffer used to argue, as an unconscious confession of both man's recognition of God's existence and his rebellion against God. It is his rather pathetic and juvenile method of cutting God down to size. After all, why does no one swear by Thor or Buddha or Kali? C.S. Lewis once challenged his readers to screw up their mental energy and see if they could manage to think a blasphemous thought about Thor. Unreal things are weak things and add nothing to the power of our speech. But not so with God or with "damn" or with "hell." It is perhaps not so far off to think of these expletives as a case of man's whistling in the dark, the nervous glance cast over the shoulder at what he fears may be there after all.

And this is more likely still because we still very much find a theoretical belief in hell (as high as 71% of Americans in a recent survey) and a conviction that certain people or types of people must go there. This is human morality and man's sense of justice speaking. It is intolerable for human beings to think that Hitler, Stalin, Mao, or Gary Ridgeway would come to precisely the same end as Albert Schweitzer or Mother Teresa. It is, of course, worth careful pondering what we are to do with the evidence that so many people believe there to be a hell, believe that there

must be a hell, when only the tiniest fraction of those same people have any concern whatsoever of ending up there themselves. What are we to do with the fact, for fact it is, that thousands upon thousands of ordinary people, people just like everyone else, conspired to participate in some way in the monstrous evils and inhumanities that darkened human history in the 20th century. It may have been Hitler's idea, but it took thousands upon thousands of ordinary folk to kill those millions of Jews, thousands upon thousands of ordinary folk to kill the millions more in Russia and China, in Biafra and Cambodia. But nowadays it is as if all the hand-wringing that went on after those ghastly evils were exposed never happened. Now, apparently, we are back to thinking that only the man at the top, the man with the evil idea is really guilty and the people who carried out his idea are somehow to be exonerated. Now, apparently, we have forgotten what evil ordinary people do when the circumstances are right, when the temptations are strong enough, when the barriers to bad behavior are removed. We are a people in this culture of astonishing moral and ethical superficiality.

We are a people who, apparently, will watch, enraptured, a television program in which one young man consorts with and makes love to a score of young women, one after another, and then, week by week, whittles the number down, after the fashion of a slave-market, until he has chosen the winner. These young people actually talk about falling in love under these circumstances! We are a people in which a score of pretty and supposedly successful young women will be happy to participate in a contest like this and experience for all to see the genuine heartbreak of love lost. These women told the entire television watching public that *they actually wanted* a man who would choose a wife by selecting her from a bevy of other women whom he had tried out before selecting her. I don't know what is worse: that television companies have the gall to put on such degrading programs or that there is a sufficient supply of young adults willing to participate. This is not a culture whose measure of moral seriousness invites respect or suggests that its opinions on matters of morality and justice should be given weight.

Last time we noted that, no matter the superficial failure to reckon with the fact, the idea of hell, of punishment, of justice being served in some permanent and even gruesome way, is something that is already with us in this world. So is the tendency of people to be Pollyannas about the future, to be sentimental, and allow their convictions to be shaped by what they *want* to be true rather than what reason suggests should be true. The fact is, hell is already all around us. It has begun already in this world. We see intimations of it everywhere. To argue that severe punishment will not be visited upon people in the next world is more daring than sensible if one but stops, looks around himself, and thinks about what is true of this world, a world that God controls as anyone must believe who believes that there is such a place and such a condition as hell, as does the vast majority of Americans today. That people may be overcome by consequences that they hoped to escape; that they are surprised by bad news they should have anticipated; that the future is a catastrophe for them and not a pleasant development is a fact of life. We see that fact everywhere we turn. Why would anyone then say that in God's universe we can be sure that there is no judgment, only pleasure, in the world to come? Interestingly, some of the 20th century's most influential writers wrote of life in this world as becoming in some circumstances a "hell" on earth. This is the theme of Sartre's *No Exit*, of Camus' *The Plague*, of Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, and of Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle*, the last

title, as you know, taken directly from Dante's *Inferno*, where the first circle of hell is the one at the top, where the least suffering is found.

It was partly for this reason that C.S. Lewis made his famous remark:

“There is no doctrine which I would more remove from Christianity than this if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, especially, of our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and has the support of reason.”

Here that? Hell has the support of reason. We expect crime to be punished in this world. We see it being punished all the time, both by the imposition of penalties by judges and juries and by the outworking of events. We expect and the families of the victims demand that Gary Ridgeway be punished for his many murders. Promiscuous teens get VD, philandering husbands lose their marriages and their reputations, embezzlers lose their jobs and their freedom, drunks lose all manner of things, gossips lose respect, the lazy and indolent lose forever opportunities that might have made every difference in the outcome of their lives, and on and on it goes. Why, then, would an entire life not have its consequence as well in the world to come? And why in the world – knowing what we know about the utter inability of human beings to be honest about themselves and their own behavior – why in the world would we not expect that God would impose his own evaluation and his own judgment upon a life and that his judgment be very, very different and very much more severe than that imposed by the individual upon himself? And why, when it is perfectly obvious that much evil goes *unpunished* in this world, should we not expect an evening of the balances in the world to come? Why would we ever suppose that God would not see to that?

It was that argument that led John Henry Newman to say:

“[Hell] is the turning point between Christianity and pantheism, it is the critical doctrine – you can't get rid of it – it is the very characteristic of Christianity. We must therefore look matters in the face. Is it more improbable that eternal punishment should be true, or that there should be no God? For if there be a God there is eternal punishment. [*Apologia pro Vita Sua*, cited in V. Grounds, “The Final State of the Wicked,” *JETS* 24/3 (1981) 215.]

A world that is morally conceived, lives that are morally evaluated and judged, a God who takes his holy will and man's behavior seriously, these are the presuppositions of Christianity. They are also the presuppositions, though often unstated, of virtually all of human life. Then, add to that the promise of redemption and salvation *for those who trust in Christ*, a salvation secured by the humiliating and terrifyingly appalling sacrifice made by God the Son on behalf of his people, and who can possibly say that hell does not figure in the view of reality that includes such a God and such a salvation?

But there is still a fierce objection. It is always the same though it is put in different ways. The objection is that hell is unworthy of God, that, on any reading, it would be a flagrant contradiction of his love and a monstrous miscarriage of his justice.

Here is Bertrand Russell, the English philosopher and atheist.

“There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ’s moral character, and that is that he believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. Christ certainly as depicted in the Gospels did believe in everlasting punishment, and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to His preaching – an attitude which is not uncommon with preachers, but which does somewhat detract from superlative excellence.... I really do not think that a person with a proper degree of kindness in his nature would have put fears and terrors of that sort into the world.... I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture, and the Christ of the Gospels, if you take Him as His chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that.” [*Why I am Not a Christian*, 22-23]

Now, perhaps we would take Russell’s critique more seriously if he were a theist. People who don’t believe that such a holy God as is revealed in the Bible exists, who deny that there is a future life, that there is a judgment, that there is even such a thing as sin or guilt, can hardly expect to be taken seriously when they tell us that hell is a cruel doctrine. People who were famous for their mistreatment of others, as Russell himself was, also should not be expected to be taken too seriously when pontificating about compassion and cruelty. But, Russell is by no means unique.

Here is Charles Templeton, one time influential Christian evangelist and associate of Billy Graham, who gave up his Christian faith and later became managing editor of the *Toronto Star* and editor-in-chief of *Maclean’s* magazine, then director of News and Public Affairs for the Canadian Television network.

“If there is any single scriptural teaching that negates the concept of a loving God it is the doctrine of eternal punishment in Hell, a place of torture for all those who refuse to do – or even *fail* to do – what God wants them to do.

It is a monstrous concept. If a so-called God of love could banish both the non-believer and the evildoer to a place of endless torment with no hope for redemption or leniency he would be a sadist beyond imagining, compared to whom history’s most infamous mass-murders, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin...would look like rank amateurs.” [*Farewell to God*, 218]

Once again, an atheist loses the right to be taken too seriously when he speaks about the ways of the God he does not believe exists, about the judgment he does not in fact expect, and about morality for which he can provide no transcendent basis whatsoever. Fact is, try as he might, Charles Templeton cannot show why a murderer who lives to a ripe old age is any worse than a do-gooder who dies young. According to him, we are all accidents, pieces of cosmic scrap washed up on the shores of eternity, coming from nowhere and going nowhere. No one who

believes that has ever been able to show that there is such a thing as morality, unless it is nothing more than the chemistry of one man's brain or the indigestion of another.

To believe against personal interest takes a level of honesty many cannot reach. Without that honesty the mind will always exert itself to evade unwelcome truth. It often requires very little evidence to persuade people to adopt conclusions that are pleasing to them and, at the same time, even overwhelming evidence is insufficient to make them accept hard truth. [Cf. Nettleton in Tyler and Bonar, *The Life and Labours of Asahel Nettleton*, 415] We see this a hundred times a day. We see it in political life, in the life of scholarship and science, we see it in the daily interaction of human beings at work, in school and in their families. The penchant of people to believe what they want to be true is a fact of life so sure and certain that it would be preposterous not to reckon with it at this most important and most serious of all points.

Take for example the simple fact that those who, in order to deny hell, deny altogether any afterlife, never seem to face the implications of their denial. They cannot. For those implications are monstrous. What that means is that finally there is no difference between Hitler and Mother Teresa or between Jesus Christ and Joseph Stalin or between the person who gives his life for another and Gary Ridgeway who took 48 or more lives in the most brutal and terrifying way. The very fact that man finds it so impossible to reconcile what he knows in his deepest soul with that repulsive idea is good evidence that the denial of justice in the afterlife is fundamentally at odds with the nature of man as he has been created. When one cannot deny an unwelcome truth without implying a world of consequences that he cannot possibly live with, that no one has ever been able to live with, it is better psychologically to accept the truth and simply not think about it, at least not seriously. That is, of course, what most people do. They accept the reality of hell and comfort themselves with some vague hope that monstrous evil will be avenged, but then think no further, lest their own sense of security be imperiled.

But there is another important point to make. Virtually all the criticism of hell as unloving and unjust proceeds on the assumption that a crudely literal concept of hell, agonizing tortures suffered by the damned for ever and ever, the searing pain of a fire that burns but never consumes, is a faithful account of the Bible's teaching. It needs to be admitted that Christians and Christian ministers who should have known better have sometimes given this impression. Here is Jonathan Edwards on what hell will be like:

“The world will probably be converted into a great lake or liquid globe of fire, in which the wicked shall be overwhelmed, which shall always be in tempest, in which they shall be tossed to and fro, having no rest day or night, vast waves or billows of fire continually rolling over their heads, of which they shall ever be full of quick sense, within and without; their heads, their eyes, their tongues, their hands, their feet, their loins and their vitals shall for ever be full of a glowing, melting fire, enough to melt the very rocks and elements. Also they shall be full of the most quick and lively sense to feel the torments, not for ten millions of ages, but for ever and ever, without any end at all.”

It is important to remember that Edwards' preaching of hell was an act of compassion. His interest in describing its terrors was precisely to help people avoid them. Nevertheless we may

well ask: is that what the Bible actually teaches us to believe about the nature of hell? I don't think so and you shouldn't think so, and for the following reasons.

1. First, all the biblical descriptions of hell, as indeed its descriptions of heaven, are figurative. We have no literal descriptions of hell given us in the Bible. We have the promise of punishment and figurative descriptions designed to make us fear that punishment, but as to precisely what it is like to be in hell, we do not know. The images employed are obviously images. Just as we cannot even visualize the picture John paints of heaven in Rev. 21, a perfect cube, fifteen hundred miles in length, breadth and height, constructed of pure gold and yet transparent like crystal, with walls made of jasper and more than 200 feet thick, with 12 gates each composed of a single pearl (you tell me what that looked like!) – John set out to overwhelm our imagination, not to describe heaven as we might describe the city of Tacoma, its topography and its plan to someone who had never been there. In the same way, the figures of speech used to describe hell collide with one another in the same way. We have fire but at the same time outer darkness. We have angels who have no bodies and, so far as we know, cannot be affected by physical forces, placed in a lake of fire. Not only are they cast into that lake but so too are death and Hades. The rich man, in the Lord's parable, cries out for water to cool his parched tongue when, as the dead between death and the resurrection, he lives only as a soul and has no tongue. The very name for hell used in the NT, *gehenna*, a transliteration of the Hebrew words "Valley of Hinnom," reminds us of how image-laden the Bible's description is. The Valley of Hinnom, the valley below the south wall of Jerusalem, is the place where, in the terrible days of Kings Ahaz and Manasseh of Judah, human sacrifices were offered to the pagan idol Moloch. The dead bodies were thrown and burnt there. Later it became the refuse dump for the city. The prophets warned of divine judgment for such sins and the valley, its gruesome history permanently etched in the Jewish consciousness, became a symbol of the judgment of the world to come, not unlike the sudden and catastrophic destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, as we pointed out last time. When the Lord takes over that imagery from the Judaism of his day, he is saying, in effect, that hell will be like what the Valley of Hinnom was for its terror, its ugliness, and its absence of God's gracious presence. We will talk at greater length next time about what hell is like, but take my point. The images used in the Bible to describe it are just that, figures of speech. We are warned by them to avoid hell at all costs, we are not instructed by them as to precisely what hell will be like or in what its punishments will consist. As Charles Hodge writes, "There seems to be no more reason for supposing that the fire spoken of in Scripture is to be a literal fire, than that the worm that never dies is a literal worm." [*Systematic Theology*, iii, 868]
2. Second, the Bible is careful to say that hell, whatever its punishments will eventually prove to be, will be strict justice, nothing more nor less and, therefore, its punishments will be discriminating. As the Lord says in Luke 12: 47-48, some will be beaten with many blows and some will be beaten with few. Far from the grotesque image of a searing fire into which all sinners are thrown indiscriminately, the Bible teaches us that no one will get anything in hell but what he or she deserves. Some will be punished relatively lightly and some much more heavily. The Lord Jesus, remember, was careful to say that the Galilean villages that witnessed his miracles but did not believe in him would be punished more severely than even Sodom and Gomorrah, those exemplars of pagan wickedness, for the Galileans had more light and were more responsible. That is why, as Alexander Whyte puts it, "The uttermost

sinner will always be found in a church not a prison.” Opportunity and privilege is the index of guilt. Those people who fill up our prisons may well have committed crimes that none of us has had any temptation to commit, But, if they die in unbelief, they will not be nearly, nearly so guilty as those who have heard the gospel all their lives and spurned it; who knew the will of God and rebelled against it; who in church felt the powers of the age to come and suppressed that feeling. Those men in prison, most of them, never had the thousandth part of our privileges and our opportunities to know God and walk with him. [*With Mercy and With Judgment*, 242-243] The church has always confessed this, but not always proclaimed it as clearly and emphatically as it should have. In Dante’s immortal *Inferno* the poet makes his way down the circles of hell, with the punishments getting more severe the lower he goes and, in each case, fitting the particular crimes being punished in that circle. But, about the top circle, the first circle, where Dante finds not only unbaptized infants but multitudes of human beings who died in ignorance of God’s Word and never sinned directly against the Gospel of Christ, Dante writes:

Here, as mine ear could note, no plaint was heard
 Except of sighs, that made the eternal air
 Tremble, not caused by tortures, but from grief
 Felt by those multitudes, many and vast,
 Of men, women, and infants...
 Only so far afflicted, that [they] live
 Desiring without hope.

That is, they suffer no positive torment at all, only the absence of joy. Well we don’t need to share Dante’s view of the destiny of unbaptized infants, for example, to appreciate the point he was making. Hell is justice, no more; no less. It was what the sinner deserves, precisely. In the judgment of hell there will be found great differences as divine justice will require.

3. Finally, the objection to hell rests entirely on its being eternal. Virtually no one would object if the doctrine were that Hitler would get a million years of punishment for what he did to the Jews but then would be redeemed, or, even, extinguished. No one thinks that punishment itself is unloving or unjust. Even the most libertine understands the need for punishments of some kind. The problem people have is that it is everlasting. But that is a point much to be pondered. Why are they willing to see much punishment, but not endless punishment? By what principle do they judge what punishment fits a lifetime of crimes against God and man? Let them say what their principle is? And given the Lord’s promise of perfect justice in hell, punishments precisely matched to guilt, then surely the weight of the punishment is spread over the time. Much of what is said against hell in our culture is put in such a way as to reflect the middle class pieties of Western civilization. People in the west, as we said, are hardly to be taken seriously when they pontificate about morality. They have often had little contact themselves with monstrous evil and have a very attenuated view of the evil that inhabits human nature. There is no sense whatsoever that sin is a grave offense against God, or that guilt is a real thing and not simply a feeling that we hire counselors to remove. This is a culture that fully understands, even if it does not entirely agree, when Charles Manson says that he ought to be paroled! If someone thinks Manson should *not* be paroled, let him say

why. And if he says that his crimes are too great for a punishment of only some years, then let him say why the holy God, who judges justly, cannot say the same thing.

But here is our last and our best answer to every objection that is raised against the reality of hell as it is taught in Holy Scripture. No one can call a God unjust or unloving who desires the salvation of all, as the Bible says he does, who does not wish for the wicked to perish but that all should come to repentance and the knowledge of the truth, and who endured terrible suffering himself to deliver his people from hell. It is a fate so real that Christ had to endure it in our place. That nothing less than the incarnation, humiliation, suffering and death of the Creator of heaven and earth was sufficient to deliver sinners from hell is the demonstration of both hell's reality and its severity.

I tell you quite frankly that I blanch at the Bible's teaching about hell. I find the idea hard to take. I find within myself the seeds of real unbelief in this doctrine. I would gladly discover that there is no such place or punishment. But I know also that I am the poorest imaginable judge of these things. I never feel, really feel, the weight of my own sin. I excuse myself so easily, defend myself so fiercely, at least in my own mind. I never really feel as I should the true horror of the prospect that I might not have been saved and rather might have been left to myself. Who am I to pass judgment on what the holy God should rightfully do to those who inveterately, willingly, and determinedly offend him and rebel against his will, even though he gave them life and a conscience. Who are we to say what the all-holy God, whose eyes are too pure to behold iniquity, should do with the wicked. I know I should think very much more seriously about my sin than I do. When Charles Spurgeon was a teenager, he remembers, he experienced a tremendous conviction of his own sinfulness. Two truths came home to him as never before: "God's majesty and my sinfulness." He had, he said, a crushing sense of his own unworthiness.

"I do not hesitate to say that those who examined my life would not have seen any extraordinary sin, yet as I looked upon *myself* I saw outrageous sin against God. I was not like other boys, untruthful, dishonest, swearing and so on. But of a sudden, I met Moses carrying the law...God's Ten Words...and as I read them, they all seemed to join in condemning me in the sight of the thrice holy Jehovah." [Cited in Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 70]

Spurgeon was not a morose person. He was not given to pessimism. He just saw things in that time of his life as they really are. And most of the best people in the world have seen the same things when they have looked within at a time of real illumination in their lives.

I have many questions, many worries. Surely grave reality should leave pipsqueak human beings with worries and questions. But I have no doubt at the last that my King and Savior would speak nothing but the truth to me and would never have spoken so solemnly on the subject unless there really were such a punishment for those who die in their sins. "If it were not true," he said, "I would have told you."