

WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN NEEDS TO KNOW

Lesson 30

“The Biblical Doctrine of Hell”

I. Introduction

Rob Bell was recently featured on the cover of “Time” magazine. Rob Bell is a pastor, speaker, and author whose messages have attracted over 10,000 weekly to his mega church in Grandville, Michigan. In recent days, the popularity of his sermons has dictated his resignation from the church to pursue an avenue of greater influence which includes a national speaking tour and authorship of an ABC television series entitled, “Stronger” which documents the spiritual journey of a musician who has discovered a path to God not espoused by most mainstream “seekers of wisdom and truth”. What has caused this great popular response and wider sphere of influence? It can best be summed up in this quote which references one of the chief tenets of Orthodox Christianity:

“A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called Heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in Hell with no chance for anything better. It’s been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’ message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.” [from an article by Al Mohler quoting from Rob Bell’s book *Love Wins*]

Misguided? Toxic? Bell finds himself totally at odds with the vast majority of evangelical theologians, noted preacher Jonathan Edwards, whose sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” gave birth to the Great Spiritual Awakening in early America, and, most notably with Jesus, Himself!

Modern day theologian, R.C. Sproul has succinctly and accurately stated that, “almost all of the Biblical teaching about Hell comes from the lips of Jesus”. [from *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* by R.C. Sproul] Given that the salvation that Jesus came to make available for us is salvation from Hell and to Heaven, what God’s Son has to say about the subject, should be of prime importance to those who count themselves among His followers. Among those who do not count themselves as a follower of Christ was the renowned philosopher and atheist, Bertrand Russell:

“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.” [from *Outrageous Truth...Seven Absolutes You Can Still Believe* by Robert Jeffress]

II. Jesus on Hell

The New Testament contains 1,850 verses that record the exact words of Jesus (dramatically highlighted in what is known as the “red letter edition!”) and of these, fully thirteen percent are concerned with Hell. Christ had more to say about Hell than He did about Heaven. The whole issue of His divinity hinges on the accuracy of His statements concerning Hell because if He were wrong, it had to be because: 1.) He was sincerely mistaken, which negates the possibility of His being the Son of God because He really has no knowledge of the fate of those who have died, or 2) He was being intentionally deceptive which also disqualifies Him from being God’s Son or even a “good man” because He knowingly misled people.

Jesus’ most descriptive story concerning Hell is found in the story of the rich man and a beggar named Lazarus who died virtually simultaneously and wound up in two decisively different places. (Luke 16: 19-26). Jesus presumes His audience has a firm grasp of the basic facts concerning Hell. There are a number of things that can be deduced from this simple, yet profound story:

1. Hell is an actual place. There are three words, all translated as “Hell”, in most English versions of the Bible. “Tartaros” is used in 2Peter 2:4 to describe the place where a special class of wicked angels has been sent. “Gehenna” is the most commonly used word for Hell. Jesus uses it 12 times to describe the eternal destiny of those who reject Christ. It was the place the Israelites who rejected God burned their children as sacrifices to the pagan deity, Molech, during the reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh. The third word is “Hades” which is the temporary location of the unrighteous dead who are awaiting the final Great White Throne Judgment. The reality of the location is revealed when Jesus said “I go to prepare a place (“topos”) for you.” Jesus reveals Heaven and Hell to be real places. In speaking of the fate of the unrighteous He says: “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:46).
2. Jesus describes Hell as a place of horrendous sufferings. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man declared he was “in agony in this flame” where “the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched”. It is also described as a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth”.
3. Jesus taught that the suffering of hell was forever. Increasingly, a number of Christians are embracing annihilationism, which purports that unbelievers don’t exist forever in Hell as believers will live forever in Heaven. The reasoning goes that a compassionate God would never subject His creatures to such a harsh sentence. Revelation 19:20 says that upon the return of Christ, the Beast and the false prophet are “thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone.” A thousand years later, John sees Satan being thrown into the same “lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet “are still alive and experiencing torment. Matthew 25:46 clearly comments on the duration of Heaven and Hell: “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life”. They both last forever!

III. Annihilationism and Universalism

Two greatly differing philosophies concerning Hell are making a “comeback”, but in reality, they have always been at work to try and undermine the teaching of God’s Word on the subject. One says that unbelievers do not eternally exist in torment, but will be tossed into the lake of fire at the end of the Great White Throne Judgment where they will perish. This theory is based on the notion, that “a good, loving God would not subject His creatures to everlasting torment”. The cessation of existence would certainly be preferable to unending torture.

The other philosophical “antidote” to the reality of Hell is the wonderfully kind, blessedly humane idea that – not to worry – everyone will, post mortem, and after encountering Christ in the afterlife and seeing that He really is who He said He was, believe in Him and be “transferred” into Heaven with Him. This is the mistaken notion classified as “universalism”. It may be the “cruellest” weapon in all of Satan’s arsenal, because it basically gives everyone a “get out of jail free” card to play in the after-life. The famous 19th century atheist, Robert Ingersoll, made the statement that “the myth of Hell represents all the meanness, all the revenge, all the selfishness, all the cruelty, all the hatred, all the infamy of which the heart of man is capable.” [from Jeffress’ book] He was famous as an orator and travelled the country delivering fiery speeches denouncing God in general, and Christianity in particular! Once, after delivering a particularly impassioned lecture on the absurdity of believing in Hell and assuring his audience that every respected intellectual had thoroughly dismissed the idea of Hell, a drunk approached him and said, “Bob, I liked your lecture; I liked what you said about Hell. But, Bob I want you to be sure about it, because I’m depending on you!” It is sad to think that people will take the opinions of avowed atheists over the truth contained in God’s Holy Word and the admonitions from Jesus own mouth.

IV. Common Objections to the idea of Eternal Condemnation

In spite of Jesus’ warning about the existence and severity of Hell, many people raise four common objections.

1. “God is too loving to send people to Hell”

Liberal theologian Clark Pinnock clearly enunciates this position: “How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness as to inflict everlasting torture upon his creatures, however sinful they may have been?” The underlying presupposition is that that kind of “god” is a creation of man rather than man being His creation. He further states that a God who could do such a thing is “more nearly like Satan than like God”.

This view assumes that God is as tolerant of sins as we are. It is a fatal misconception! Psalm 50:21 states “You thought I was just like you”. Habakkuk 1:13 reminds us His “eyes are too pure to approve

evil.” He also cannot “look on wickedness with favor”. Pastor Robert Jeffress says “If the cross tells us anything, it reminds us God has zero tolerance for sin.”

This objection has for its basis the presupposition that we really aren’t that bad. We see ourselves as flawed, but not deserving of eternal death. The problem is we view sin through our eyes, our perspective, not His!

2. “Hell is too severe a punishment for wrong beliefs”

Hebrews 10:29 clues us in to the true severity of what we simply label as “believing wrong”; “How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of Grace?” “Trampled?” “Unclean?” “Insulted?” sounds as if simple “unbelief” or “misbelief” is very consequential to God. Note that the sin of unbelief is against God, His son, and His Spirit! The person who rejects, or neglects the gospel is rendering Christ’s terrible death by crucifixion as meaningless!

3. “It is unfair to condemn those who have never had the chance to believe in Jesus.”

The Bible declares that “all have sinned and fallen short of God’s Glory!” We may tolerate ignorance and sin in others, but, remember: We are not God! Romans 3:10 says; “There is none righteous, not even one!” If all are guilty, the question is not: “Why doesn’t God save everyone?”, but “Why does God save anyone?”. Those whom God pardons are the recipients of His mercy, and those who experience Hell are the recipients of His justice. But, neither group is treated unjustly.

And lastly:

4. “How can anyone enjoy Heaven if people are burning in Hell?”

In the book entitled “Hell Under Fire”, Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson, Professor of Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary, has this to say about the very essence of Hell:

“Hell is a sphere of separation and deprivation of pain and punishment, of darkness and destruction, and of disintegration and perishing. The vocabulary of the New Testament in regard to it includes: darkness outside, weeping and grinding of teeth, destruction of body and soul, eternal fire, fire of Hell, condemned to Hell, forfeiting eternal life, the wrath of God, everlasting destruction away from the presence of the Lord, separation, blackest darkness.”

Jesus wept over the fate of the lost during His sojourn on earth: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it!” (Luke 14:34). But when He returns, He will, without a trace of remorse or regret, pronounce the final sentence on all who have rejected Him. The term “Hades” is the place the unrighteous dead go immediately upon

their death and at the so-called “Great White Throne Judgment” the following occurs: “... the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, everyone of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the Lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown in the lake of fire.”

Disturbing as this description is, there immediately follows on its heels the description of the Heavenly city prepared “as a bride adorned for her husband”, and a loud voice emanates from the throne, “Behold the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:13 – 22:4)

Just as John was faithful to record in his gospel that “whosoever believes in Him should not perish”, he also finishes the book that concludes the Bible by saying: “the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come’. And let the one who hears say, ‘Come’. And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes (wants to!) take the water of life without cost.” (Revelation 22:17)

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus

Sources

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