

HELL: ETERNAL TORMENT

A Sobering Meditation on the Nature of Hell

Jesus told His disciples, “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” (Mk. 9:43). Three times in three verses (Mk. 9:43, 45, 47), Jesus says we must take drastic measures to deal with sin, since it can lead to hell. As Christians, it behooves us to carefully examine the teaching of the Bible concerning hell, because without a clear comprehension of hell, Jesus’ warnings will lack the force upon our sanctification they’re intended to have.

While the Bible uses many metaphors to depict hell, these metaphors, nevertheless, represent a frightening reality—a place where eternal torment occurs. We’re not surprised that liberals deny the reality of hell, but unfortunately some evangelicals do as well. They say that it is not a place of eternal torment, but of temporal torment that results in annihilation. But is this what the Bible teaches? I’d like to address three objections posed by annihilationists. This refutation is important so that we can feel the weight of Jesus’ words about hell.

First, annihilationists say the “destruction” of hell is to be defined as the cessation of conscious life. Revelation 17:11 talks about the beast (which is a person) going to destruction: “As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction.” The beast is destroyed, but does this mean he is annihilated? Revelation 20:10 is clear that that is not the correct interpretation: “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.” When we harmonize the two passages it is plain that “destruction” is defined as being tormented day and night forever and ever.

Second, annihilationists say that the fire of hell speaks of consumption and not pain. Jesus used “unquenchable fire” (Mk. 9:43) to describe hell. He reiterated this point a few verses later by saying that in hell “the fire is not quenched” (vs. 48). Obviously, there is no fire extinguisher that can put this fire out. Annihilationists are quick to say that this speaks of the fire and not necessarily the people in the fire. Luke 16:19-31 paints a different picture. In this passage, Jesus tells the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which is probably the most graphic illustration of hell in the Bible. We’re told that the rich man died and was buried, “and in Hades, being in torment...he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame’” (vs. 23-24). Notice that the flames bring anguish, and any opportunity to receive mercy is past. The rich man is not even allowed to lick a wet finger for relief. And Abraham gives him no hope that his misery and torment will ever end, not even through annihilation.

Third, annihilationists say that the “second death” refers to the termination of life. Jesus promised the persecuted believers at the church in Smyrna that if they conquered they would “not be hurt by the second death” (Rev. 2:11). Revelation 21:8 describes the second death: “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murders, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake of fire that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (cf. Rev. 20:14). The second death is the lake of fire, but we already saw that Revelation 20:10 says those in the “lake of fire and sulfur...will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

Despite the efforts of some to interpret hell as annihilation, the Bible is unequivocally clear that the unrighteous “will go away into *eternal* punishment, but the righteous into *eternal* life” (Matt. 25:46). Note carefully that there are two—and only two options—available to everyone after the judgment... eternal punishment or eternal life.

As you can imagine, many despise the doctrine of hell. But even sincere Christians wonder if sins committed in a finite life deserve infinite punishment. We need to realize that what makes sin so atrocious is not just the sin itself, but the fact that it is committed against a perfect, holy, and just God. Jonathan Edwards said, “Our obligation to love, honor and obey any being is in proportion to his loveliness, honorableness, and authority... God is a being infinitely lovely, because he hath infinite excellency and beauty... So sin against God, being a violation of infinite obligations, must be a crime infinitely heinous, and so deserving infinite punishment.”

A biblical understanding of hell will help us work out our salvation with fear and trembling as we hear Jesus say, “Take drastic measures to deal with sin, since it can lead to hell.”

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