

## **“The Unbeliever at Death: The Horrors of Hell”**

**Matthew 10: 24-28**

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**Text: Matthew 10:24-28 (NIV) <sup>24</sup> “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. <sup>25</sup> It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household! <sup>26</sup> “So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. <sup>27</sup> What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. <sup>28</sup> Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”**

The Lord Jesus Christ said these words:

**<sup>28</sup> “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”**

We see immediately that those who say there cannot be such a place as Hell must be wrong. Those who say a loving God would never send people to Hell...must be wrong. Preachers and theologians and Christian writers who suggest that maybe Hell does not really exist...must be wrong. Why? Because Jesus said there is such a place as Hell and that the loving God does send people there. Unless Jesus is wrong as some others suggest. But we know that Jesus was never wrong and is never wrong. So...what are we to think of this unhappy matter of Hell? First, let us pray.

There is nothing humorous about this topic but I can start off on a light note. Early last week as I was struggling to begin this sermon, I heard on the news that the world was supposed to end yesterday May 21<sup>st</sup>! A man named Harold Camping has been saying that. Camping is a noted Bible teacher who is a little unusual...one might say. But...I prayed and said “Lord...I don’t really want to spend the last week of my life writing a sermon on Hell for next Sunday...if the world is going to end the day before! So...could you give me the inside scoop on this...because you would know right?” All I heard from him was “Just go ahead and write your sermon.” So, here we are. The topic is Hell.

Nearly forty years ago, the late Pastor D. James Kennedy stepped into his pulpit at the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church and preached a sermon about Hell. The title of Dr. Kennedy’s message was: “The Most Unpopular Subject in the World!” I think that was a good title. No one really feels at ease discussing Hell except a few strange preachers who seem to delight in picturing it. In fact, the closer we walk with the Lord Jesus Christ the more uneasy we are about Hell...because there

is something very, very unsettling about it. That is why we said last week that we cannot know that Osama bin Laden did not turn to Christ before his death and receive eternal life and avoid Hell or eternal punishment. I'm not saying that he was saved. But that Christ *could* have saved him. And that Hell is so brutal a subject that we must be very careful to remember that God alone knows who is there. And God alone is to be feared as the One who can destroy both body and soul in Hell.

This topic is receiving national attention again because of a book by a Michigan Pastor named Rob Bell. Mr. Bell's book "Love Wins" has raised some questions as to his own views. Some think that he is arguing for universal salvation...the idea that in the end God will let everyone into Heaven. Others say Bell is merely trying get people thinking about the issues. I am not interested in critiquing Mr. Bell's book or his views. I will say that his words are confusing and that is always a mistake for preachers. The preacher must not leave people wondering what he really means to say. I have done that at times and I must strive not to. But the listener also needs to be very careful. The listener needs to hear what the preacher is trying to say and to quote him accurately. That is not always the case either. So today....let me share my understanding of the issue of Hell with the greatest possible clarity. Please listen with care and if you hear something with which you do not agree, please keep listening so you don't miss the explanation. Listen to the sermon several times on the website if need be. But please listen closely as I've seen people leave the church over what they think my view of Hell might be.

Let's look at this issue the way we did last week, with questions and responses. Again, some of these things are debatable and so at times you will only be hearing what one simple preaching Pastor thinks.

### **First: Is There Really Any Evidence For An Afterlife Anyway...Whether It Be In Heaven Or Hell?**

We live in a material and scientific age when many people believe only in what they can see and touch and feel. They point out what Carl Sagan said years ago "The universe is all there ever was and is and ever will be." Life is in the now. When material life dies...*you* die. Or as Jack Kevorkian so indelicately put it "When your body dies...you rot!" According to the material view, you are nothing more than a collection of cells and electrical impulses and when all of that stops...*you* stop!

Stephen Hawking is a sixty nine year old British scientist who has been paralyzed for nearly fifty years. He recently told the Guardian newspaper that belief in an afterlife is a "fairy story" for people who afraid of dying. Hawking is strictly a materialist. He writes: "I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no Heaven or afterlife for broken down computers..." Actually, that is not true either. Mr. Hawking should visit the attic of our church where he would find a very real afterlife for broken down computers! There's a load of them up there! I don't know if they are in computer Heaven or computer Hell but they definitely have an afterlife!

Turning serious again...Mr. Hawking is right to point out that human beings are afraid of death. He means by that they are afraid they will no longer exist. But I suspect they are afraid of death because they are afraid they may *continue to exist* and they will be judged. But yes, either way there is fear of death. Hawking will one day learn how wrong he has been. I wonder if he ever read these marvelous words from the Bible where the New Testament tells us that the Lord Jesus Christ came to:

**Hebrews 2:15 (NIV) “... free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”**

But that verse is about Heaven which we will discuss next week. Hawking... is wrong to insist that all we human beings are is a brain atop a body. Ultimately, he is insisting that without physical life a being cannot exist. We can tell from this that Hawking does not even believe in God because God is invisible and without a physical body...and He certainly exists very nicely! The Holy Spirit moves about without a physical body and He certainly exists as well. No...we all know and sense that there is something to us other than body and brain and that something is spirit. And it is that spirit that we sense must somehow live on. Indeed, we read in the Word of God:

**Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NIV) <sup>11</sup> “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”**

In other words, we can sense that we were meant to live forever and that we will live on. But we simply cannot understand what has happened and we cannot be sure of eternal life...until we meet Christ who gives us a certainty about the afterlife. The only people who doubt the afterlife are the unsaved and I suspect even they know it will be there...but they do not wish to consider the coming judgment. So, in any case, the Lord Jesus Christ affirmed the afterlife over and over again.

### **Second: What Happens To All People At The Moment Of Physical Death?**

The short answer is that they will find themselves in a millisecond in the presence of the Almighty God. And they will be judged according to their works and the lives they led. And even the best of people will fall far short of qualifying for Heaven. They will be judged for their sins. The unbeliever and the believer alike. But for the unbeliever there will be a moment of terror when he or she learns that God does exist and that He is the Divine and righteous judge! Consider these passages:

**2 Corinthians 5:10 (NIV) <sup>10</sup> For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.**

There is little reason to expect a long delay awaiting that first trial or judgment. The Bible says:

**Hebrews 9:27 (NIV) <sup>27</sup> “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment”**

God has appointed the Risen Christ to sit upon that judgment seat. The Christian who belongs to Him will find his sins erased and will only discuss his service to Christ. That's next week. But the unbeliever will face a horrible moment of truth...a moment that reveals how wrong they were to deny God and to ignore God's rightful calling upon their lives to worship Him! They will slip in seconds into a state of terror when they realize it was true after all! The Word of God tells us:

**Hebrews 10:31 (NIV) <sup>31</sup> “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”**

Pray for those who are still lost! The only way anyone can avoid falling into the hands of the living God is to belong to Christ the Savior! Those who deny Christ will, in the end, be trying to save themselves by their works. They will try to suggest that they lived well and if there really is an afterlife they deserve it too. But they will tremble as they plead especially if they remember hearing of Christ! They might weep at the day when Jesus said these words:

**John 8:24 (NIV) <sup>24</sup> “I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am [the one I claim to be], you will indeed die in your sins.”**

That means they will die without having their sins taken away. The unbeliever will be shocked to find their sins hanging upon their souls. They will stand before God unclean. They will in effect receive a preliminary judgment and they will be rejected from the presence of God. To Hell? Yes...to some kind of Hellish detention until the final judgment.

The Lord Jesus always portrayed such people as being “cast out” or put out of his presence. Remember the parable of the great feast whereby a man came in not dressed in wedding clothes? In other words, not clothed in righteousness? We read:

**Matthew 22:11-14 (NIV) <sup>11</sup> “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. <sup>12</sup> ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. <sup>13</sup> “Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ <sup>14</sup> “For many are invited, but few are chosen.”**

Now many hear this and they ask if God is unfair? Why create people who He knew would never repent and come to Christ? Why create people who would never even hear of Christ? Why create people who he knew in advance would end up in Hell and who would not be chosen? I do not know. We cannot fully know the ways of God!

Yet man will bring a charge against God and say “You had no right to make me....then allow me to be born into sin...and then not awaken my soul to Christ...and then cast me into Hell!” But we do not understand the mind of God. We do not know. I do not know. All we know is that God is perfectly Holy and He only does that which is righteous and Holy! Even the Apostle Paul indicated that he did not understand God’s ways in this matter either. We read:

**Romans 9:20-22 (NIV) <sup>20</sup> “But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"**

**<sup>21</sup> Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? <sup>22</sup> What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath--prepared for destruction?"**

My understanding is that at the moment of physical death, all people come before God for a preliminary judgment. The lost are sent to a state away from God to await the final judgment. Again...God has reasons that can only be righteous and we do well not to question His character. But...people always ask...

**Third: Would A Good And Loving God Really Send People To Hell Because They Do Not Believe In Jesus Christ? What If They Never Even Heard Of Jesus Christ? How Would That Be Fair?**

This, of course, is the ever-present question asked by those who do not believe the Gospel and who do not believe in Hell. They sometimes believe in Heaven but not Hell. They are sometimes “Universalists” who believe in Heaven and who believe that everyone will be saved somehow. But this question “Would God send anyone to Hell for not believing in Jesus” is also a frequent question among Christians. Again, some ask “Why would God...how could God...send people to Hell because they rejected Christ? What if they never even heard of Jesus?”

The problem is in the premise to the question. Please understand Christian: God never sends anyone to Hell because they reject Jesus Christ! Sinners go to Hell because they are sinners who cannot live eternally in the presence of God. If they never hear of Jesus, God will not owe them an apology. Sinners get what they deserve. If you are a Judge and you fine me a hundred dollars for driving a hundred miles an hour down Grand River Avenue...and I claim that I did not know there was someone to pay my fine...you will say “Well that’s too bad. In any case, you were speeding and deserve the fine!”

We want all the world to hear of the offer of Christ. But if no one hears and no one repents, they will still deserve Hell and not Heaven. The Word of God makes it very clear:

**Romans 3:23 (NIV) <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,**

**Romans 6:23 (NIV) <sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Somehow God will hold everyone responsible for their sins and He was never required to send a Savior. This teaching offends the world and some Christians because it suggests that God is a fiend and a small, petty, tyrannical and cruel dictator who is hateful. People say things like “My God would never send anyone to Hell.” But “their God” exists in their heads...not in the Bible. Yet...all of these thoughts beg the question that is always out there...

**Four: Why Would God Send People To Hell Anyway...Even If They Did Hear Of Jesus And Reject His Offer Of Salvation? Why would Hell be necessary?**

Consider this question. Is Hell exclusively about punishment? I think not. To be sure, Hell is where the wicked suffer for rejecting God’s Lordship in their lives. And Hell is permanent and endless and without remedy. The Catholic doctrine of “Purgatory” suggests that sins can be “worked off” after a period of suffering leaving the sinner “cleaned up” and ready for Heaven. But the Bible knows nothing about any such option. “Purgatory” is an invention of those who feel that even with Christ man must suffer for himself.

Why would Hell be necessary? Two reasons. FIRST: to punish sin. To exact justice. Are there be grades of sin? Yes, of course. Will there be different levels of punishment? Apparently yes. One day, the Lord Jesus Christ was speaking of the hypocrites and he said:

**Luke 20:46-47 (NIV) <sup>46</sup> "Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. <sup>47</sup> They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."**

God cannot be loving and just and Holy and not punish sin. But I see a SECOND reason for Hell’s existence and necessity...and I think it is not appreciated. It is this: God is creating a new world that will have no sin and no one will be there who has not been saved and changed into Christ likeness. It is not often realized but God is at work preparing for that new world. Think of it of it this way. Why do we as a society send criminals to prisons? To punish? Yes. And hopefully to rehabilitate. But also to separate them from the rest of the population that has not broken the law! To keep the law breakers away from the law abiders so as to make them able to live securely. Hell is the way God will separate out all sin from his coming Kingdom. Jesus made this point about the great coming separation in the parable of the weeds:

**Matthew 13:27-30 (NIV) <sup>27</sup> "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' <sup>28</sup> "'An enemy did this,' he replied. "The servants asked**

him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' <sup>29</sup> "'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. <sup>30</sup> Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

Jesus is saying that at the end...at the great Day of Judgment...the wheat and the weeds will be separated...into Heaven and Hell. And this leads us to a final question. Thus far, I have affirmed all of the usual evangelical views about Hell being for the wicked, permanent, and eternal. But notice how Jesus often refers to what happens to the wicked. "Tie them in bundles to be burned." Final question:

**Five: If Hell Is Eternal, Does That Necessarily Mean That The Wicked Will Suffer Conscious Torment Forever And Ever? Is That The Only Way To Look At Their Fate?**

That view, that Hell will be endless conscious torment for fifty trillion, billion years and that will only be the first minute...is the typically the theologically politically correct view. I've known Christians who get upset if eternal conscious punishment is questioned...almost as if they want that to be the case. And that idea can be argued from Scripture. The Lord Jesus Christ spoke of the sheep and the goats being separated:

**Matthew 25:46 (NIV) <sup>46</sup> "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."**

So, the argument is that if Heaven is eternal life then Hell must be eternal suffering and torment. But I'm open to a different way of looking at this. It seems to me that eternal punishment could easily mean a period of punishment and then eternal death. This is sometimes called or "Annihilationism" and it is held only by a few theologians. Although it has been considered a possible way of looking at eternal suffering by many Christians throughout the history of the church.

Why might this be the case? For one thing, the Lord Jesus Christ always seems to speak of Hell as destruction. Consider even today's passage and a couple of others:

**"Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in Hell."**

**"First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned"**

**Mark 9:47-48 (NIV) "...thrown into hell, <sup>48</sup> where "the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."**

The Lord Jesus Christ typically uses the language of destruction. The fire and the worm are Biblical images for consumption not just punishment. So, it may be that at the Great Judgment when Death and Hades are thrown into the fire that will be the time of permanent eternal destruction of the unsaved. And Hell itself will be consumed. Consider:

**Revelation 20:14-15 (NIV) <sup>14</sup> Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. <sup>15</sup> If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.**

The theological argument would be that the God who insisted punishment be proportional to crime and said “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” [Exodus 21:14] would not torture a sinner for all eternity for a lifetime of sin on Earth. In our day, we debate the morality of torture for terrorists. Would anyone feel that God who is perfectly Holy and merciful would be less merciful than man? What state would put a murderer in an electric chair and not turn the voltage up enough to end his life...but just torture him for weeks?

My view is that Bible teaches that Hell is real and punishing and everlasting and allows no escape. But that perhaps...in the end...when God makes all things new He will destroy even Hell and those unsaved who are not in Heaven. Then nowhere in his creation would any of His image-bearers live on except in Heaven. That by the way, would make the fate of my unsaved uncle and your nice but unsaved brother a little easier to endure. But maybe not. As Pastor Kennedy said about Hell...it is the “Most Unpopular Subject in the World.”

Let us pray.

