

FOREVER DAMNED

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We're in a series on prophecy. Inevitably when we talk about the end we talk about alternatives. "Knowing the fear of the Lord," Paul said, "I persuade men." One of the reasons why the church of Jesus Christ is involved in missions, why we're involved in evangelism is not only because God saves but also on the other side there is a day that God has appointed to judge the world. There is both a heaven and a hell. The knowledge of both motivates us in our Christian behavior and in our evangelism and witness.

I read the parable Luke 16:19. Of all the persons who talk about hell in the scripture it's surprising but it's true. Jesus has more to say on the subject of hell than did the apostle Paul or any of the apostles or any writer of the Old Testament. It is Jesus who taught most plainly. He who came to offer us heaven spoke most earnestly and frankly about hell.

"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus full of sores. He desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. [This is a story that we might not take it so much as an actual historical incident, although it may be that. But it's a story like a parable designed to convey a truth.] The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy upon 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.' But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things. But now he is comforted here and you are in anguish. And beside all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able and none may cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then I beg you, father, send him to my father's house for I have five brothers so that he may warn them lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father, Abraham. But if someone goes to them from the dead they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

I feel as a Christian I am helped by what other people have written. A good deal of the context which are coming to you in outline form that I give this evening has been shaped by C. S. Lewis' book The Problem of Pain. If you've never had the experience of reading C. S. Lewis and want an invigorating and mental experience by all means read him.

The doctrine of hell is a modern doctrine, which Christians at time are embarrassed that they proclaim that they believe. It is for some a very difficult doctrine to defend. It involves the fact that there are some if not the many who will not be redeemed. Who will never know God's grace and who will never experience heaven. There's probably no doctrine that we'd ever more willingly remove from scripture than this particular doctrine.

I was at a questioning period of an ordination candidate, the question was asked, If you were tempted to be a heretic in one area, which area would it be? He responded, the subject of

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damnation. For if I could I would want all men to be saved. The apostle Paul wrestled with and states that very thing himself.

But the doctrine of hell, the subject of eternal damnation has not only the full support of scripture but the full weight of the Lord's own words behind it.

If we are designed that our happiness and our ultimate welfare lies in our voluntary surrender to God then no one can make that surrender but ourselves. If you say all will be saved regardless would you say that all will be saved then in spite of their will? And if all are saved in spite of their will how can there be any such a thing as a voluntary act of surrender to God. If you say that all will be saved because they will it then how can you say that there would be saved to refused to will to be saved.

It might be said, I might say, I would pay any price if this doctrine were not true. If it could be removed from scripture. I think in your own heart when you look at the horrors of hell as described in scripture you would say the same. If we could prevent someone from going there we would pay any cost and any price. We must however recognize that we could not pay one thousandth of a slice that God has already paid in the cross of Christ Jesus to remove hell from any man or any woman's life. God wanted so much to remove hell and the possibility of hell that he sent his only Son into the earth that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

I think to be aware of what objections are both modern and ancient to the doctrine of hell we should probably outline and respond to five objections to the doctrine of hell that have been raised on a philosophic level.

First, the idea that scripture presents that hell is punitive punishment rather than medial punishment. In the American penal system, when sending someone to prison, the idea behind giving him a short term rather than a term that has no possibility of parole, the idea that somehow in prison he will have time to think. So that prison will be in a sense a reformatory. The person coming out will have been reformed. He will have learned his lesson. The idea is remedial punishment. We've discovered in our nation to our horror that prison does not work this way. But of course the doctrine of hell involves no idea of remediation. It involves punishment. Punishment unending without the possibility of parole. This is a strong objection philosophically that has been raised to the doctrine of hell.

C. S. Lewis talks about the purpose of pain in the life of the unbeliever. In a very pointed way he relates it to the doctrine of hell. He indicates that pain in the unbeliever's life can on occasion be the way that God plants the flag of truth within a rebel fortress. If you conceive of the individual as the rebel and life is going along ok, everything's fine. One is not jarred to his sense of eternal reality. It may be some sharp or numbing experience which involves pain of emotion or pain physically which plants the flag of truth within the rebel fortress which causes the individual to recognize that indeed life is not unending, that there is a moment of judgment, moment at God's bar. That there is eternity to face.

Lewis goes on to extend the fact that if in this life an individual does not even respond to the planting of the flag of truth within his rebel fortress hell, is God's way everlastingly of planting the flag of truth that he will judge all that is not corresponding to him forever.

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The factor of hell being retributive rather than remedial boils down to the basic fact that from God's point of view, hell is man's choice. Indeed as Jesus said, "Men love darkness rather than light." God simply ratifies the choice of an individual's determination not to submit his will to God.

One theologian has said this means that a person who chooses to walk in darkness will in the future find himself in utter darkness. Hell is the consequence of God's respect for our humanity. He made us with the ability to say no. Lewis portrays eternal punishment as when after doing everything he can do short of circumventing a person's free will, God at last says to man, "Thy will be done." The everlasting punishment which anyone may endure will simply be the inevitable result of his own deliberate and persistent choice of sin.

As dark as hell is, as gruesome as it is, the scriptures really don't leave us any doubt that in the ultimate sense man would rather if he is in hell be in hell than be in heaven. That's a startling thought.

If you read Revelation 6, which describes the close of the age you, will find persons crying out for death rather than for God. Hide us, they say, from him who sits on the throne and the wrath of the lamb.

What is being preferred is the misery and the end of death rather than living in the presence of God forever which would be greater torment than hell itself which is the absence of his presence.

If an individual has willed in his life to be absent from God then the punishment in eternity would be to be made to be present with God. Just as if a person has willed in this life sinfully to escape from a marriage, the punishment would be to stay married because they have willed to be gone. They would rather have the hogpen of the prodigal than to return to that which is right. I'd suggest that a serious look at scripture would indicate that persons who are without God would be more miserable in heaven than in hell. It becomes in a sense a measure of God's love to let them live outside of his presence than to coerce them for eternity to worship him.

Another objection that has been lodging against the doctrine of hell is that there is a disproportionateness between eternal damnation and transitory sin. Why should God allow anyone to voluntarily choose hell when they only have such a short time span and hell is forever? I think in response to this there are several things which may be noted.

We must be careful of the illusion that given an unlimited amount of time a person will finally come to the right choice. It just doesn't happen. Persons even in this short life span given an unlimited amount of time do not necessarily make the right choices. Age does not necessarily bring wisdom. We can go back to the age of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis and find that longevity of life does not bring necessarily a better quality in choice. What happens in regard to life is what happens every day in respect to polling practices in this nation. The short span of life reveals or illicit a true sampling of what the totality is. Researchers don't have to ask every American who is their candidate for president to be able to pretty precisely and scientifically calculate what the vote is going to be on election day. Not too many times in recent days have they missed. A true sampling is revealed if one gets the right polling techniques.

So it is we do not need an eternity of existence to determine where we are going for life in a sense provides God in us a true sampling of what we would be like if we had forever to make the

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choice. There is a point of finality – that finality must come some time. One faces even in this life the fact that lifelong choices are made from momentary or transitory times.

We make career choices on the basis of short time. So that what is true for life carries over also into the eternal world. True the time seems short but from God's point of view it provides a true sampling of what we'd be like even if we had an eternity of earthly existence.

I have a feeling from scripture that he who lives longer either becomes more ready for hell or he becomes more ready for heaven. I'm amazed how those who have walked with God for a lifetime when they approach the moment of going to be with God are saint-like. On the other hand if you've been around persons who have lived away from God all their life and have no intention at this late age of capitulating to God become more and more in their conduct, language, mannerism and attitude fit really for hell.

Another objection to hell is the frightening image of the pains of hell which are presented in scripture. I think we need to recognize that from the Lord's teaching there are three symbols which he uses to describe hell or eternal damnation.

The first is the symbol of punishment. Matthew 25:46 "They will go away into eternal punishment." Matthew 9:42 & 48 "Hell where the fire is not quenched."

The second symbol that Jesus uses is destruction. Matthew 10:28 "Fear him who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell."

And thirdly hell is spoken of as banishment. Jesus talks of outer darkness. In the parable of the virgins in Matthew 25 he speaks of those who remain outside, banished. In the parable of the wedding garment in Matthew he speaks of those who try to get into the wedding feast unprepared, unadorned. And therefore are banished into outer darkness. Striking that one image of hell should be fire and another image outer darkness, the absence of light. The symbols though all compliment one another. There has been a modern heresy sometimes even held by born again believers that what hell is is the annihilation of a person. That there is no such thing as an eternal existence of damnation but simply God in the last judgment will annihilate the very existence of the person he created. To say such is to take one of the symbols namely the symbol of destruction and lift it and isolate it from the others. For the Lord indicates in addition to destruction, which involves really the spiritual aspects of man, there is punishment and banishment.

Jesus in Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and the goats, gives a fascinating contrast. He says that the saved go to a place which is prepared for them and those who go to hell go to a place prepared for the devil and his angels. Notice what is prepared for man. Man is prepared for heaven. That's what God made us for. Man is not prepared for hell. Hell is prepared for the devil and the angels of the devil. So to enter hell is to lose one's humanity. It is to be destroyed as a human being. To exist in a form where one is conscious of his identity but having lost the virtue and essence of what it means to be human. To have freedom, for example. Whereas heaven is the crowning of humanity. We who have willed voluntarily to serve God have the option to exercise that will into the ages.

To be a completely man/woman therefore means to have the passion, the emotions, and the will offered to God.

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To have lost one's humanity would be to be consisting of a will utterly centered in oneself and passions utterly uncontrolled by the will.

Frightening as hell is, the Lord intends for it to be a very frightening prospect. God is so humble (I'm indebted to C. S. Lewis for this) that he will accept our confession of faith in him even if we have no higher motive than coming to him out of the fear of escaping hell. That involves incredible condescension.

Another objection that is sometimes raised to the doctrine of hell is this: how could anyone be comfortable in heaven if he knows that there is even one soul in hell? How could you possibly be comforted or be enjoying the delight of heaven, the beauty of heaven if you know there is even one lost person in hell?

The minute you say this you realize you're laying blame on God because you're saying, I can't be comfortable while God can. If God can be comfortable while there is hell and I can't be then my justice must be greater than the God of whom the scripture speaks.

I think our misconception of the coexistence of heaven and hell comes from our understanding of geography. We imagine that England and America exist in history on a contemporary basis. The histories of America and England are going along in a joint stream together. And other countries as well. We cannot however say the same thing about heaven and hell. If we think of hell and heaven existing side by side in sequential history we do violence to the teaching of scripture. Jesus pictures hell as the end. He sees it in terms of finality not in terms of duration. Therefore consignment to hell from God's point of view and from heaven's point of view is the end of the story not the beginning of the story. It is the same way that on the human side we would accept death. Death we would regard as the end of the story. We don't expect to see the person again. We are resolved to it. Heaven will begin. God will wipe away all tears from our eyes. We'll not be conscious or indeed have a thought because hell is from the saints point of view, the end. It has no future. It is not co existing with heaven.

One other objection that has been raised about the doctrine of hell is that the ultimate loss of a single soul means the defeat of God's omnipotence. It is a way of saying God is not all powerful or he could save everyone.

This could not be the truth if from the outset God's omnipotence had to it attached one condition: God's omnipotence is dependent upon our will for in the omnipotence and all powerfulness of God he chose to create a being who could say no. If therefore God violates the means by which he created us in the very beginning the opportunity to say no he is overruled his own order in creating us. It'd be nice to believe that with one wave of the hand God would change his mind and become fickle even as we might. But as I've indicated earlier to be unregenerate or to will not to serve God and be in heaven may be seen as something worse than hell.

As someone has said of hell: the doors of hell are locked on the inside. If a person chooses to go to hell it is because he has willed to go there. Jesus says that he stands at the door and knocks and if anyone will open the door he will come in. Which is a way of saying that if indeed a person suffers eternally in hell it is because they refuse to open the door. Their hand has been on the latch but they have kept the door locked and in some cases barred.

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If we ask God to let those into heaven who have refused to bow their will to him what are we asking God to do? We're asking him to wipe out their past sins at all costs. To give them a fresh start. Smoothing every difficulty and offering miraculous help. But God has already done these things at Calvary. He has offered the wiping out of sins. He has offered the fresh start. He has offered miraculous help. God has forgiven in the cross. If one rejects the cross then God has no choice than to honor the person's own decision to leave them alone. And that is what he does.

One parenthetical thing that might be mentioned that has concerned persons about hell. It's very clear that for a person who has had the opportunity to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, we understand there's a choice. But what about children and what about the heathen.

In response to children and babies. In the Old Testament we find God placing a prohibition on child sacrifice. Jesus in Matthew 18:10 says "In heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven." Jesus also took the children into his arms and blessed them. To conceive of a God who sends children to hell who have not yet come to a sufficient age to even make an intelligent or willful response to him is to assume the existence of a God who is morally reprehensible as the Babylonian God who required the destruction by fire of children.

I cannot see or see the scriptures affirming God consigning any children to hell who have not had the opportunity to make a willful response to him. In light of Jesus' attitude, the Old Testament attitude and the statements about Jesus gathering the children in his arms.

What about the heathen? Paul in Romans 1 & 2 specifically addresses this question. That's a whole subject by itself. The essence of what Paul says is simply this, that if a person who without knowledge of Jesus Christ is walking in this world he has two signposts to lead him to God. One is the created order. He can determine by the things which are made that God is. And also by conscious. He has the law of the ought for his behavior. Paul simply indicates that on that day one's conscious will either accuse or he says perhaps excuse them on the day of God's judgment, he goes on however quickly to relate that in all of his travels, all of his ministry, all of his experience in scripture he has never seen the person who has walked fully in the light of his own conscious or in the light of creation. Therefore the emphasis is on him knowing the fear of the Lord he must persuade men to accept Jesus Christ who alone can save from sin.

Jesus' story in Luke 16 is the story about a person whom we might even identify as an individual who never had the opportunity to personally know Jesus Christ. To personally hear him teach or to have a decision that he could render to God based upon Christ's cross. He knew nothing of the resurrection, nor of Christ's sufferings. Yet he is seen as being in hell. The story is sometimes simplistically misunderstood to assume that Jesus is saying that the rich who live rich in this life are going to get theirs in the age to come and the poor are going to get theirs – the poor get heaven and the rich get hell. But to read this story in that fashion would be really an erroneous conception of the story and subvert the purpose for which Jesus gave it.

The essence of the story is this: Lazarus who is in heaven listened to Moses and the prophets. The rich man who is in hell failed to listen to either. Failed in his life to move toward God. The knowledge which he has, the light which he had which was Moses and the prophets, having spurned that knowledge, he is in hell. Having moved away from God he has no ability to be excused on the day of judgment. Therefore the response to Abraham, that Abraham would send someone to tell them. Where upon Abraham responds that he's not going to do that. They have

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Moses and the prophets. If even someone has risen from the dead they will not believe in answer to the man's query that he should send someone risen from the dead.

You could say that this is the heart of Jesus' understanding on the subject of hell in the New Testament. Jesus is very flatly saying that a person who truly received Moses and the law would truly receive him. But a person who had spurned the light which he had will truly move away from the revelation of Jesus Christ as well.

Many times on the mission field where the gospel has never been preached before, those who are most responsive to the gospel are those who are already struggling to see the light. But in the last analysis I think in regard to the subject of hell when we've talked about the subject in total we need to come down to our own individual responsibility. The common era that we make is trying to figure out how God is going to judge the whole human race. It is his responsibility and not ours. I must continually fall back upon the justice of God to say with Paul and the prophets, will not the judge of all the earth do right? So instead of trying to assume God's role in judging the world and second guess him I accept his teaching and say, This doctrine is designed for me. This design is to help me understand in my own personal life that there is a fate before me. Ultimately my burning concern has to be what is going to happen to me. The choice is mine. I am unique in creation. There is no one like me. There is no one like you.

God sets before us as he set before the people of the Old Testament, life and death. His way and man's way. To choose his way is to live. To choose man's way is to die.

We have to think, Lord, in this moment of those whose hearts have burned most for you in this earth. It takes but a moment to realize that those who have burned the brightest and the best for you in their witness have taken you at your word that indeed without you the world is lost and without hope. Thou hast not provided a way of salvation outside of the Lord Jesus Christ. Convinced of the verity of your word, those who have served you best and highest have responded with commitment of everything. Even Lord the same commitment which you had when you came. If Lord, there were another way then surely you would not have taken on the crucible of the cross. If we could be saved by our own effort, if we could be saved by a second chance, if we could be saved by some religious fetish, some religious program or act then there would have been no need for you to have come. You could have rested. You could have remained in glory. Help us to enter in to your concern and your thoughts of this world. Help us to live soberly yet not gloomily. We recognize that we're very much creatures and captives of time. Before us stretches an eternal expanse. I pray, Lord Jesus, for all within this room that never would there be anyone who in their will say no to you so as to experience eternal punishment, pain and banishment from you forever. Instead we pray that we shall be found in you. And in that day you would say to us, Well done, good and faithful servant. Amen.