

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CHRISTIANS SIN? - Part twelve

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IS HELL A REAL, LITERAL PLACE, AND IF SO, IS ITS PUNISHMENT ETERNAL?

I need to say two things by way of introduction. This teaching will be followed in coming sessions (three in a row) by Christmas messages. Does a teaching like this morning's belong anyway near the Christmas season? Or is it morbid - a Christmas downer - something that should be saved for a Sunday night in August?

And that leads into the first thing I want to say about this morning's teaching. It *is* related to what Christians everywhere believe about Christmas. Consider the greatest Christmas text of all - **John 3:16** - "**For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.**"

Question: Why did God send the Son? Answer: To keep people from *perishing*. What does *perishing* mean? Does it mean *dying*? If that the case, the Son's coming was a colossal failure. Everyone dies - believers and non-believers.

But the text doesn't say the Son came to keep believers from *dying*. He came to keep them from something much worse than physical death. He came to keep them from *perishing*. And John's text makes the meaning of *perishing* clear by comparing it with its opposite - *eternal life*.

Jesus came to earth. That's the baby of Christmas. And that baby came so people would put saving trust in Him. He came to keep them from perishing. This is the *reason* we celebrate Christmas.

I said there were *two* things I wanted to say in introduction. The second is we all need to think through where we're going to form our opinions about God and judgment and eternity. The most common way in our culture is to map out in our own fallen minds the kind of behavior we feel is *appropriate* for God. We mistakenly equate a *loving* God with a morally *tolerant* God. And eternal punishment doesn't seem appropriate to us, not surprisingly, because we're sinners.

And so we need to remember it's *God* who gets to tell us about God. We have nothing to go by here but His sovereign, absolute self-revelation. And that's where we're going to turn today. We've just been studying God's judgment pronounced against those who reject Jesus Christ, God the Son. Today we're forced into the logical question of *what happens* to these people? We'll return to this topic in about three weeks.

I can still remember the day, years ago now, that I first read these undiluted words from Jonathan Edwards, the first president of Princeton University, as he pleaded with his congregation on the reality and seriousness of the subject of hell in the Scriptures. I know this will sound very strange to our modern ears.

I'm preparing you by telling you this is a very long quote. But try to have these ancient, rather dated sounding words, creep into the realm of at least *possible* factual truth about the punishment awaiting the unrepentant. And I say we need to at least entertain them because I believe the tendency is to reject and tune the very idea of eternal punishment out. And this, not for any *Scriptural* reason, but for reasons of the *easy tolerance* that our present culture has accepted as the only way God *could* respond to unholiness in His creatures.

Now, listen to these words from Jonathan Edwards, however painful they may be to honestly entertain:

"Be entreated to consider attentively how great and awful a thing eternity is. Although you cannot comprehend it the more by considering, yet you may be made more sensible that it is not a thing to be disregarded. Do but consider what it is to suffer extreme torment for ever and ever; to suffer it day and night, from one year to another, from one age to another, and from one thousand ages to another, and so adding age to age, and thousands to thousands, in pain, in wailing and lamenting, groaning and shrieking, and gnashing your teeth; with your souls full of dreadful grief and amazement, with your bodies and every member full of racking torture, without any possibility of getting ease; without any possibility of moving God to pity by your cries; without any possibility of hiding yourselves from him; without any possibility of diverting your thoughts from your pain; without any possibility of obtaining any manner of mitigation, or help, or change for the better."

"Do but consider how dreadful despair will be in such torment. How dismal will it be, when you are under such torment. How dismal will it be, when you are under these racking torments, to know assuredly that you never, never shall be delivered from them; to have no hope: when you shall wish that you might be turned into nothing, but shall have no hope of it; when you would rejoice, if you might but have any relief, after you shall have endured these torments millions of ages, but shall have no hope of it."

"After you shall have worn out the age of the sun, moon, and stars, in your dolorous groans and lamentations, without rest day and night, or one minute's ease, yet you shall have no hope of ever being delivered; after you shall have worn a thousand more such ages, you shall have no hope, but shall know that you are not one whit nearer to the end of your torments; but that still there are the same groans, the same shrieks, the same doleful cries, incessantly to be made by you, and that the smoke of your torment shall still ascend up for ever and ever."

"Your souls, which shall have been agitated with the wrath of God all this while, will still exist to bear more wrath; your bodies, which shall have been burning all this while in these glowing flames, shall not have been consumed, but will remain through eternity, which will not have been at all shortened by what shall have been past. How sinking would it be to you, to endure such pain as you have felt in this world, without any

hopes, and to know that you never should be delivered from it, nor have one minute's rest. You can now scarcely conceive how doleful that would be. How much more to endure the vast weight of the wrath of God without hope! The more the damned in hell think of the eternity of their torments, the more amazing will it appear to them; and alas, they will not be able to keep it out of their minds."

"Their tortures will not divert them from it, but will fix their attention to it. O how dreadful will eternity appear to them after they have so long an experience of their torments! The damned in hell will have two infinities perpetually to amaze them, and swallow them up: one is an infinite God, whose wrath they will bear, and in whom they will behold their perfect and irreconcilable enemy. The other is the infinite duration of their torment."

Those are strong words. Too strong for some. Others have come up with different ways of interpreting hell in the Scriptures. Those views will shape the approach of the next three messages in this series on the Biblical Doctrine of Divine Judgment. *I hold to a more literal interpretation of the words of Jesus on eternal punishment.* But I think it's important to *"always be ready to give a reason"* to people who ask why we believe what we believe.

Basically, there are *four views of final punishment* most commonly held among those who call themselves believers. We'll examine all of them in coming weeks. There's the *literal view*, the *metaphorical view*, the *conditional view*, and the *purgatorial view*.

This week I want to consider a view that is rapidly catching hold, even among evangelicals, which we'll refer to as the *conditional view*. This approach teaches that *only those who put saving faith in Jesus Christ will live forever.* "*Conditional immortality*" and "*annihilationism*" are other names for this position.

The central conviction is that *the unrepentant wicked simply cease to exist - either at death itself, or they are later wiped out in the fires of hell.* In other words, there *is* such a place as hell, but the wicked do not consciously suffer unending punishment there for their sins. They are immediately wiped out by God's judgment and simply cease to exist.

There are verses of Scripture that they use to support their position:

Psalm 104:35 - "Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked *be no more!* Bless the Lord, O my soul! Praise the Lord!"

Matthew 10:28 - "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can *destroy both soul and body in hell.*"

John 12:25 - "Whoever loves his life *loses it*, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

Romans 6:23 - "For the wages of sin *is death*, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I think several things need to be said about *annihilationism* and its use of these texts and others like them:

- 1) **When the Bible talks about the wicked being "destroyed" in hell it doesn't mean the loss of existence.**

Consider the use of that word in **Matthew 10:28** - "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can *destroy both soul and body in hell.*"

The word translated "*destroy*" is "*apollymi*." It is used in the Scriptures to describe **wineskins that have gone brittle and broken, or food that has gone bad.** Whenever the word is used to refer to living beings it means, not loss of *being*, but loss of *well-being*. Check any good expository dictionary and you'll get the same idea.

You can have your car *destroyed* in an accident - *totaled* is the word we frequently use. The matter of the car still exists but is now useless as a car. Gather up all the pieces and they would weigh the same on a scale. There is no loss of *existence*, but it's not a *car* anymore. The car, *as a car was meant to be*, is destroyed.

- 2) **Most of the Old Testament references used to show the wicked as being "no more" are referring to their removal from the earthly scene.**

These simply are *not* references to anyone's eternal state. It is the *earthly* existence of the wicked and God's earthly judgment of them that is being described. This is particularly clear in **Psalm 104:35** - "Let sinners be consumed *from the earth*, and let the wicked be *no more!* Bless the Lord, O my soul! Praise the Lord!"

David is sick and tired of his enemies chasing him down like a dog. In no uncertain terms he prays for God to avenge him and deal with his enemies. But there are many texts that carry this kind of earthly meaning:

Psalm 37:2 - "For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb."

Psalm 37:9-10 - "For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. [10] In just a little while, the

wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there."

Psalm 37:20 - "But the wicked will perish; the enemies of the Lord are like the glory of the pastures; they vanish—like smoke they vanish away."

All of these passages (and dozens like them) are talking about one thing only - **God's judgement on the wicked in this world**. The Psalmist is rejoicing in God going to battle for His people Israel. He will vindicate their righteous cause. **Almost every commentary in the world will give you that interpretation of those verses.**

3) **Consider passages that deal specifically with the final, future judgment of the wicked in the age yet to come**

- a) **Matthew 25:41-46** - "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. [42] For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, [43] I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' [44] Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' [45] Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' [46] And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Now, whatever your view, Jesus does make at least some things very clear in these verses: **the fate of the wicked is "eternal punishment"**-(46)- **"These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."**

I hope you don't miss what just happened in the text. Jesus does something very important. He **replaces** the words "**eternal fire** (41) with "**eternal punishment**"(46). In other words, Jesus Himself makes it clear that this fire - whatever this fire is actually like (we simply don't know much about it) - this fire does not "**destroy**" in the sense of **ceasing to exist**. That's what Jesus intends to say when He states that the **punishment** is eternal. Not just the **fire itself**.

Notice also that we are told clearly that the wicked go to the **same place** as was "**prepared for the devil and his angels**" - (41) - **"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'**"

In other words, the wicked are consigned to "**the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels**"(41). Why does this matter? Consider our next text:

- b) **Revelation 20:10-15** - "...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. [11] Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. [12] And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. [13] And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. [14] Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. [15] And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

Here we get a bit more detail about who ends up in Hell. We are told that **individual people** - not the "**world's system**" or "**principalities**" - **people** who don't have their names recorded in the book of life - those **same individual people** - are thrown into the same place where the Devil, beast and false prophet are. And then, to remove all doubt about the **nature** of this place, we are told it is a place where **they** are "**tormented day and night for ever and ever**"(20:10).

So Jesus and John seem to give the same united message. The wicked join the devil in the same place to suffer the same fate.

"Well, what about that stuff about hell being the "second death?" - Revelation 20:14 - "Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire." **"Doesn't that mean they'll be dead - finished - wiped out?"**

Listen, the whole point of the passage is the exact opposite. **Death and Hades are cast into the lake of fire (14)**. **Hades** is the Greek word for the place described in the Old Testament as **sheol** - literally, "**that which is unseen**," or the "**place of departed spirits**." The spirits of the wicked are held in hades awaiting final sentencing at the second coming of Jesus. Then that temporary place is done away with. The "**eternal state**" is fixed. It is unalterable.

Also, at that time, **the first death is done away with**. This is a very important point. John says that **"...death and hades were cast into the lake of fire"**(20:14). Those are very important words. John is saying that death itself will be done away with. **Nobody will die anymore**. And what he means by that is existence won't **cease** after the judgment as it does now. Death itself will be done away with.

The whole point of the Bible is this: ***the first death is really no big problem***. We don't need to fear it. It is a temporary condition of our earthly existence and it can't separate Christians from the ***love of God in Christ Jesus***. Our loved ones feel the loss far more than we who pass away. God can fix that all up, no problem. It's eternal judgment - the ***second death*** - the ***demise of temporary death*** - that we must give due weight to.

The second death is far worse! Listen to what Jesus said about it: **Matthew 10:28** - " ***And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.***"

Surely, the whole point of Jesus' words is that there is something much worse than physical death. Now, suppose you're talking to your neighbor. He's an atheist. He doesn't believe in God or life beyond the grave. He believes he is the result of cosmic fluke and evolution. He thinks he's not long out of the trees and, along with the other mammals, he will die and simply turn into fertilizer.

Do you really think that Jesus is saying to that neighbor, "***Listen man, there's something much worse than mere physical death. You could cease to exist! You could be annihilated!***"? This makes no sense. This person already ***expects*** he or she will die and just cease to exist.

Is Jesus really just saying "***Don't fear the one who can end your existence. Rather, fear the one who can end your existence!***" In what meaningful sense could ***this*** be what Jesus means when he gave His passionate warning - "***And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.***"

And what did Jesus mean when He told Judas that it would have been better for him if he had never been born? ***Being annihilated is the same as not having been born.***

As much as Edward's old words fill me with dread (and isn't it interesting that Jesus said we ***should*** fear the one who could destroy body and soul in hell?) I just can't bring myself to mentally process the conditional immortality view. Jesus clearly taught there was something much ***worse*** than mere physical death. There was a spiritual death - a ***second*** death - that was greatly to be feared because its effects were ***eternally perceived***.

All of this to say when we talk to people about being "***saved***" we don't mean we're asking them to be ***improved***. There is something our loving, truth-telling Lord told us to ***fear***. There was something to be trusting in Him ***for*** that was more than a better self-image and sense of purpose. He's still not willing that any should ***perish***. And that must mean more than physical death because even those who place trust in Jesus Christ will physically die. And Jesus was loving enough to tell us all the truth.