

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CHRISTIANS SIN? - Part thirteen

Sunday, January 6th, 2012, 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #1616

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

Should we talk about coming judgement? Does it fit in with embracing a gospel of mercy and grace? Do people like to hear this discussed? Or, more to the point, does everyone *need* to think about it? Does it fit in with what Christians are *supposed* to be proclaiming today? Consider this important text:

Acts 24:24-25 - "After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about *faith in Christ Jesus* [now, what exactly does that phrase *mean*?] [25] **And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed** [shouldn't he have been *comforted*? What did Paul say to him?] and said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you."

Here we get to be the fly on the wall. We get to hear the substance of Paul's witness before Felix. This is what Paul discussed with a political leader when he had opportunity presented. And the significant thing about what Paul presented is he presented it in the context where a Christian would be especially careful and circumspect. You want to be politically correct when witnessing to a political leader. How would you talk about "*faith in Jesus Christ*" to a Prime Minister, or President, or William and Kate?

And it's in *this* context, when so much was at stake, that Paul presses home the idea of future judgment in his presentation of the gospel. He obviously feels that, whatever else this great leader may or not hear about God, eternity, and Jesus Christ, Felix *must* get the information of God's coming judgment clearly presented.

And we also know this was no *accident* in Paul's presentation. We know this was Paul's *studied, theological understanding* of what presenting the gospel is all about. We know that from his words in **Romans 2:14-16** - "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. [15] They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them [16] on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."

So we know that the doctrine of divine judgment was, in Paul's mind, a crucial part of the gospel itself. In other words, if you *didn't* talk about divine judgment, then, whatever else you may *think* you're presenting, you're *not* presenting the gospel.

So, yes, I say, we have good Scriptural evidence that it is both appropriate and essential that we talk about God's coming judgment if we're going to present Christian witness in this present age.

Last week we began studying the first of four different interpretations of the "hell" passages in the New Testament. The view we began analyzing is called *conditional immortality*. In this view, just as the name implies, *immortality* or *eternal life* is only the possession of the redeemed. Eternal life is *conditioned* upon redemption in Christ Jesus. Those outside of saving faith are simply annihilated at death or at the time of the judgment (usually the later).

We took the bulk of the teaching examining how this view lines up with two New Testament texts:

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.**"

So we know quite clearly from the lips of Jesus Himself that those judged individuals end up in the same place as the one "*prepared for the devil and his angels*"(41). Then we also noted the way Jesus changed the words "*eternal fire*"(41) to "*eternal punishment*"(46). It was as though He anticipated the objection that it was only the *fire of hell* that endured eternally, not the *punishment of the wicked*.

Then we linked this text up with **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.**"

The important point here is the place Jesus identified in our Matthew text is further specifically defined as a place where the devil will be **"tormented day and night forever and ever"**(10). And then, just as Jesus said, John has revealed to him that this place of eternal torment is the **very same place** into which **every individual not found in the book of life will be thrown into** (15).

Today I want to consider one more reason why I find the position of **conditional immortality** unacceptable Scripturally. And by that I mean I would **prefer** conditional immortality **personally**. But the boundaries of God's revelation don't leave that option open to me.

1) THERE IS ALSO THE SCRIPTURAL ISSUE OF DEGREES OF PUNISHMENT IN HELL THAT NEEDS TO BE ACCOUNTED FOR.

None of these passages makes any sense if those without Christ simply cease to exist after judgment. We've already studied this truth in this series. Let me just point you again to several passages that highlight this truth:

Matthew 11:20-24 - "Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. [21] "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. [22] But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. [23] And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. [24] But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."

These are tough verses. For now, just underscore the words "**more bearable**"(22), and "**more tolerable**"(24). Another text:

Luke 12:46-48 - "...the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful. [47] And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. [48] But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more."

Again, these are tricky verses. But note the terms "**severe beating**"(47), and "**light beating**"(48). We shouldn't even pretend to know all that these terms convey. But it isn't pressing the parable too heavily or demanding too much of the words to conclude at the very least they can't be exactly the same.

The point here is it's difficult to make those verses meaningful when **all the lost receive the same fate**. Even if some suffer in hell longer than others before being annihilated, it's hard to see that there's much difference when, for all eternity, they both share the same non-existence. **Annihilation allows for no ultimate differentiation**.

2) I BELIEVE THE BIBLE TEACHES THE PUNISHMENT OF HELL WILL BE AN ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

I don't *like* this idea. But it's restated too many times to ignore:

Matthew 25:46 - "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Notice that the same adjective is used to describe punishment as is used to describe life. If you want to have the possibility for **conscious eternal reward in heaven** (and I've never heard anyone complaining that it would be **unjust** of God to give us so much eternal reward for what our finite lives on this earth could possibly earn, though they frequently argue that finite sins can't possibly deserve eternal punishment), but if you want to have the possibility of conscious eternal reward in heaven you must also allow for **conscious eternal punishment in hell**. They are both described in exactly the same terms of human experience. You can't take away one without taking away the other.

Notice also that Jesus says the actual **punishment** is eternal. **Annihilationism** teaches the punishment is **immediate** and the **results of the punishment** are eternal. You are gone forever. Jesus says something different. The **punishment itself** is eternal. It is **perceived** as being eternal punishment.

Something has to have conscious existence to bear punishment. You can't punish a rock or a tree. You can't punish someone who isn't there. Eternal punishment **requires** eternal existence.

Mark 9:47-48 - "And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, [48] 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'"

Notice that the worm does **not** die in this description. The fire never **finishes its work**. Jesus doesn't even bother to state the obvious. When a fire totally consumes what it's burning, it goes out. This fire lasts because it **doesn't annihilate**.

Revelation 14:9-11 - "And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, [10] he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. [11] And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image,

and whoever receives the mark of its name."

Notice that the "**smoke of their torment**" goes up forever and ever..."(11). Again, if the wicked are annihilated, whatever smoke rises, it's not the smoke of torment. You might refer to it as the smoke of God's **judgment**. But you'd never refer to it as the smoke of their **torment**. Non-entities can't be tormented.

3) LET ME DEAL WITH ONE FINAL OBJECTION TO THE DOCTRINE OF ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

I mentioned this briefly earlier. Some may say, "**Pastor Don, I just don't feel that any sin committed by finite human beings could possibly deserve eternal conscious punishment!**"

This is a hard objection to answer, but not for the reasons most people think. It's hard to deal with because the Bible simply doesn't put much stock on what we think God should or shouldn't do. He never asks our opinion.

But let's at least state clearly what we can be sure of. **We know that the Devil and the fallen angels aren't annihilated. We know that they are tormented in hell forever - Revelation 20:10 - "....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."**

What does that have to do with us, Pastor Don?"

Quite a bit. You see, we are absolutely certain that both the Devil and the fallen angels are **created beings. They are not, by nature, eternal beings.** They were made by God. They were designed and given life from God just as you and I. And we know we have something else in common with them. They also committed sins - **finite sins**, because they are only finite beings - against God's glorious name. And we are absolutely certain, from the revelation of the Scriptures, that God considered it **just** to punish them eternally for their rebellion.

One more important thought on this. If the punishment for sin **isn't** an eternal punishment you have to decide at which point in time **enough** time has been served. And once you do that, you're saying the time served under punishment is enough to **pay** for the sins committed.

And the problem with that concept - the very **deep** Scriptural problem - is only the **blood of Jesus** atones for human sin. There is no amount of time one can serve to pay for sin committed. That would make the **sinner** the source of his own finally acquitted standing before God. **We** would be the ones paying the debt of our own sin through **time served**.

Further, and perhaps just as important, the punishment of sin goes on forever and ever because iniquity **grows** forever and ever. Sinners aren't **less** enslaved by their sin with the passing of time. Their rebellion only **grows**. It never **diminishes**. Their hatred of God only **grows**. It never **lessens**. In other words, there is nothing **remedial** in the sufferings of eternal damnation - **Revelation 22:11** - "**Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.**" The sinner will be **more** guilty in a trillion years than he ever was at the first.

4) IT'S AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF ETERNAL PUNISHMENT THAT THE AMAZING GRACE OF THE GOSPEL SHINES SO BRILLIANTLY

God is always **just** in His punishment and **amazing** in His grace. His mercy ought to overwhelm us when it's considered against His blazing passion for moral perfection and righteousness:

2 Peter 3:3-9 - "...knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. [4] They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation. [5] For they **deliberately overlook** this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, [6] and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. [7] But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. [8] But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. [9] The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

Notice, there is the promise of the future **fire of judgment**. It's going to come upon all the earth. God Himself will make sure of it. **But at the very same time, He doesn't want anyone to have to face it!** He's made a way in Jesus Christ to punish my sin on the cross, **so He's still just and holy**, and yet **pardons and offers grace and mercy to the truly guilty!**

The reason this is so important is the whole gospel falls apart when it's left out. That's how you test the importance of any doctrine. What

is left of the atoning work of Christ when it's removed? What happens to the gospel? And without this neglected - ***much*** neglected today - doctrine of divine judgment the cross makes no sense, the Bible has no unique message, and the church has no unique mission.

No wonder Paul told Felix about the coming judgment. There is no other way to make God's grace in Christ Jesus shine with all of its absolutely unique hope and sparkle.