

Hell Fire

There can scarcely be a believer who does not shudder and recoil at the awfulness of the Bible's language about hell. As wonderful as heaven appears to the child of God, the dreadfulness of hell and divine punishment is fearful. Those of us with unbelieving loved ones hardly know what to think. In humble acceptance we can only say, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Why no fear?

Have you ever wondered why believers who will never be in hell and never endure hell's horrors nevertheless fear hell more than those who are careering carelessly into it? It is not an accident. Our dread is a divine lesson to enlarge and enrich our appreciation of the greatness of our salvation. Believers find hell dreadful not only because it is dreadful but because it measures the infinite wickedness of sin and demonstrates the wrath, fury and hatred of God against it.

Our Sin-bearer

Having seen our own sin punished in our Substitute and having beheld Christ subject to God's wrath, believers understand a little better both the misery of hell and the magnificence of heaven. We understand the suffering of our Saviour better, and more highly esteem the price paid to keep us from the one place and fit us for the other. By this contrast the glory of our salvation is more clearly viewed and more greatly valued.

A glimpse into hell

Three times in today's passage the Lord draws His disciples' attention to the terrors of hell. It seems He wishes to lay bare the horror of that place. Hell is a "fire that never shall be quenched", a place where the worm does not die, which may refer to a guilty conscience. It is a place of torment carefully to be avoided even to the giving up of hand, foot, and eye.

The great divide

Remember the Lord has been teaching His disciples about election, security and acceptance with God. He has revealed the stark division that exists between the righteous and the wicked of this world; the elect and the reprobate. Some are righteous in Christ, chosen to salvation by divine fiat and redeemed by precious blood. They are covenant people; justified by God, purchased by the Son to whom they belong, and called to spiritual life by the Spirit of God. Others, being left to themselves remain willingly in their evil ways.

No chopping off body parts

Now the Lord describes hell to His disciples. He is not teaching them to chop off body parts or pluck out eyes to protect themselves from evil. If He were the gospel would not be good news and grace must surrender to works. Rather, He is teaching us to know the wickedness of sin that damns to hell that we might be more grateful for the mercy that removes our condemnation.

Fire and salt

The Saviour's reference to fire and salt continues the lesson and heightens the contrast. The fires of hell burn endlessly, but they do not consume. They are fuelled by divine wrath and never go out. The smoke of torment ascends up for ever and ever; giving no rest day or night. That is the fire that salts, or preserves, those who suffer everlastingly.

Salt of the covenant

Equally true is that the lives of the elect endure for ever by our union with the eternal Son of God. Believers are preserved under the terms of the covenant of grace, not by fire but by the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God on our behalf. In the Old Testament every sacrifice had to be offered with salt, and spiritually speaking every approach to God must be salted with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the salt of the covenant. Faith lays hold on the completed work of Jesus Christ for eternal life, joy and peace.

Hell is for believers

As the Lord approached His death He wished to leave with His disciples a clear understanding of why He was dying and

what His sacrifice would achieve. This included appreciating what we are saved from and what we are saved to. It is good for believers to have a lively sense of heaven and hell. Warnings of hell will not frighten one reprobate into glory. But for the elect the revelation of hell, as the revelation of heaven, reveals the infinite power, wisdom and holiness of God.

Saved from hell and saved for glory

We come by faith to Him who has the keys of death and hell. We trust He will keep our souls from going down to the pit and bring us rejoicing to the place God has prepared for them that love Him. We thank the Lord for showing us what He has saved us from, and what He is saving us for.

Amen

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