
CLARITY TRUMPET

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For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself for battle? So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.

-First Corinthians 14:8, 9-

Bringing Hell Out of the Shadows

Larry Dixon, in his book *The Other Side of the Good News*, rightly observes: "In a society which values tolerance above truth, the doctrine of hell is a theological unmentionable."

"However, when one is conditioned to be tolerant of all viewpoints, he or she is drained of a passion for truth. For the Christian, a passion for truth ought to lead to a passion for souls. One article acknowledges that the doctrine of hell 'no longer gets its float in the church parade; it has become a museum piece at best, stored in the shadows of a far corner.'"

The Problem with Hell

There are two problems: there are the *emotional* struggles, and the very real *intellectual* concerns. Both emotionally and intellectually I feel with C. S. Lewis when he said, "There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than [hell], if it lay in my power. . . I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully: 'All will be saved.'" But such an achievement was not in his power any more than it is in mine -- nor in yours.

EMOTIONALLY we struggle with hell being real for good reasons. Loved ones may have already died and there were clear indications they did not know the Lord. We do not *want* them to be in such a place as hell. The emotions are sometimes greatly magnified if someone is part of a religious system with strong traditional ties. I've had more than a few religious folks say something like, "If what you are saying is true all my ancestors are in hell. I can't believe that, and if it's true I'd rather die and go to be with them than to be with a

God who would allow such a thing." Emotionally hell strikes out.

INTELLECTUALLY it gets no better. When logic is applied to the question of hell, hell comes up the loser again. A man recently said, "I wouldn't dream of treating my own children that way no matter how bad they were. I can't believe a loving God would stoop lower in His treatment of us than I would of my own." Many are persuaded that it is inconceivable that a loving, God would allow *any* of His creatures to endure *eternal* suffering for any sin no matter how gross, nor for any *number* of sins no matter how many. It seems that an eternal lake of fire is a more fitting topic for a spine-tingling sci fi story than to be attributed to a loving all-wise God about Whom Scripture says, "Nothing shall be impossible."

"A passion for truth ought to lead to a passion for souls."

Various Views of Hell

"There is No hell."

This is, of course, a flat rejection of a place known as hell. Proponents of this view may, however, hold to the idea that there is a hell but that it is not a *place*. If they conceive of any kind of "hell" it may be nothing more than a state of mind, or it may be equivalent to the bad times here on earth. Perhaps you've heard someone say, "I've just been through hell." Others will speculate, "You make you own heaven or hell." Some years ago a movie was made entitled *To Hell and Back*, depicting the destruction and horrors of war. Such concepts of hell leave no room for there being an actual *place* of punishment. Such a possibility is completely unthinkable.

"There is a Hell, but those in it will be Destroyed."

This view is usually referred to as *annihilationism*. It is a view held by some cults, most notably the Jehovah's Witnesses, and by some who appear evangelical in other areas - Clark Pinnock and John R. W. Stott, for instance. Annihilationists contend that Scripture clearly teaches that people who die in an unsaved state will be destroyed, not that they will consciously suffer punishment forever and ever. Bible verses such as II Thessalonians 1:9 are used in support of

this opinion: *These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.*

“There is a Hell, but it is not Eternal.”

Those who are of this persuasion also use Scripture in support of their premise. Colossians 1:20 is a verse that proponents of this view point to substantiating that the day will come when all creatures of God will be reconciled to Him, including the Hitlers of this world, and even Satan himself. The verse says, *And by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.* This view is called *universalism* or *restorationism*, i. e., *all* will eventually be brought back into right relationship with God. It is thought that there is no single sin, nor are there any number of sins one could commit to merit suffering eternally in a conscious state.

“There is a Hell, but those there will be given Another Chance to Believe.”

Even in this view the ones who are given another chance to believe in Christ yet refuse Him, will be destroyed or annihilated. The “second chance” idea is sometimes “supported” from a passage such as I Peter 3:19, 20 where it states that Christ “went and preached to the spirits in prison. . . .” The thought is that He preached the Gospel, giving them a new opportunity to believe. Thought: If you were suffering the pangs of hell and given a chance to escape its torments, wouldn’t you grab it? It’s highly improbable that *anyone* would be left to be punished or destroyed. So, in all practicality, this view represents a different slant on either universalism (all will be reconciled), or annihilationism (all remaining unbelievers will be destroyed).

“Hell is a Real Place in which there is Eternal, Conscious Punishment.”

This is the view of hell traditionally held by Bible believing Protestants as well as Roman Catholics. But what does it matter what the church’s tradition has been? The real question – the one we must face honestly and as objectively as possible -- is, “Is it correct? What *does* the Bible teach concerning hell?” We must go to the Scripture itself to find out.

What are the Bible Facts about Hell?

I am persuaded that all I need to know about any subject that is touched upon in Scripture is adequately and accurately revealed *in those same Scriptures*. I don’t need to go outside the Bible to know and understand the Bible’s teaching on any subject. True, an awareness of the cultural trends and practices of Bible times adds light; the insights of great Christian thinkers throughout the church age can be an invaluable aid to proper understanding, but it has always been true that *the best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself*.

Men, even godly ones, may have their *opinions* about such things as hell, but the question that must be answered is, “What do they *know*?” What do any of us really *know* about hell? Nothing, absolutely nothing! Hell, like its counterpart heaven, is one of those mysteries that can only be understood by what God has revealed in His Word. There is nowhere else to turn for authentic truth concerning it. All of our emotional rejection of hell, or our intellectual twisting of the doctrine, as well as our dogmatic defense of it, means nothing. Our only recourse is to the totally trustworthy “Thus says the Lord!” So, we turn to Scripture and we discover certain non debatable FACTS: facts that can be rejected to be sure, facts that can be reshaped to fit one’s presuppositions, facts that can be spiritualized to such an extent that it becomes difficult to discern the truth from the fantasy, but *facts* nonetheless.

Fact #1: Jesus Spoke More of Hell than He did of Heaven

Though He spoke a great deal of “the kingdom of heaven” on earth, Jesus spoke little of Heaven itself. However, the Greek word for hell (*gehenna*) is used twelve times in the New Testament and of those twelve times Jesus spoke of it eleven times (Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5). There is, therefore, a *place* called hell. Jesus said so. Denying it doesn’t change anything. You may speculate all you want as to its nature or duration, but your speculations will not diminish for a moment the stark reality of hell being a literal place, a location to which some people go. What you do with this fact is between you and God, but it is a fact that honest people cannot ignore.

Fact #2: Those Who Go to Hell are Not Destroyed

Jesus said, *And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell* (Matthew 10:28). The word *destroy* in this verse is translated from the Greek word *apollumi*. It means to be lost or ruined. It was the word used by “an angel of the Lord” appearing to Joseph who told him to flee to Egypt *“for Herod will seek the young child to destroy Him”* (Matthew 2:13). But it is also the same word used to describe the “lost” sheep, the “lost” coin, and the “lost” son (Luke 15:4, 6, 9, 24, 32) – all of whom were *found*. Certainly neither the sheep, nor the coin, nor the son were *destroyed* in the sense of annihilation. They were, in fact, *lost until* they were found.

When II Thessalonians 1:9 speaks of the wicked being “punished with everlasting destruction” it literally means everlasting *ruin* and *loss*. It does not mean annihilation. Even matter cannot be annihilated; much less can spirit.

Jude 7 adds some very interesting light to the subject. Referring to the judgment of “Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them” it says that they *“are suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”* Hundreds upon hundreds of years after their destruction the people of these cities were still suffering (present tense) the “vengeance of eternal fire.” They had not been annihilated. Though their bodies had long since returned to dust, they – the people who had occupied those bodies – were still alive; they had not been destroyed. Annihilation, you see, would be *ended* punishment, not *endless*!

Fact #3: The Final Hell is Eternal

Jesus described the judgment of believers and unbelievers in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew. He said of the unbelievers that *“these will go away into everlasting punishment”* (Matthew 25:46). Earlier He revealed the very words He will speak to these: *“Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels”* (v. 41).

To use Colossians 1:20 as a proof text that every creature of God will one day be in heaven with Him is invalid. The parallel passage of Ephesians 1:10 is clearer that He will *“gather*

together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him.” So, anyone not “in Christ” will not be included. Reconciliation is not the same thing as salvation. The Bible states that *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them”* and then adds, *“we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God”* (II Corinthians 5:19, 20). Man must accept the reconciliation provided by God. If he does not, he stands justly condemned before a holy God.

Some believe that *everlasting* and *eternal* do not really mean without end, but the same word (*aion* or *aionios*) translated *everlasting* in describing hell is the very same word describing our “eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12), God’s “eternal Spirit” (9:14), the believer’s “eternal inheritance” (9:15), “eternal salvation” (5:9), the “everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (II Peter 1:11), the “eternal glory” to which we have been called (I Peter 5:10), and “the everlasting God” (Romans 16:26). Forty seven times this word is used to describe the life which the believer in Christ has received. If all of these are without end, then hell is also; and if hell has an end, then all that is holy and good – including God Himself – will also be terminated. Honesty demands the acceptance of the eternal nature of hell.

Fact #4: Once an Unbeliever Enters Hell there is No Opportunity to Escape

Despite what the Apostles’ Creed says (which the apostles never saw), there is no indication that Jesus went physically to hell during the time between His crucifixion and His resurrection. His body was in the tomb during that time. The First Peter passage referred to earlier states that He “by the Spirit” proclaimed something “to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient. . . in the days of Noah . . .” (vs.18-20). Whatever was proclaimed was confined to those who lived in Noah’s day. Perhaps they were informed that what Noah had told them was true after all. It does not apply to everyone who has ever been “in prison.” This is obviously a rather difficult passage to understand, but Hebrews 9:27 is not difficult to understand at all. It clearly says, *“It is appointed for men to die (to be separated) once, but after this the judgment”* – not, “after this another chance.”

In addition, consider further the language describing the duration and condition of hell.

- The fire in hell (gehenna) is *never quenched* and *the worm does not die* (Mark 9:43-49). *Gehenna* originally referred to the Valley of Hinnom, a trash dump outside Jerusalem which burnt continually, and where children were sometimes offered to the god Moloch. But that fire has long since been extinguished and the worms (maggots) of that fire died along with it. The fire of which Jesus spoke will never cease burning. Even if you take this description as symbolism, what on earth could it symbolize; the *reality* of such symbolism would be much worse.

- *The smoke of the unbeliever's torment "ascends forever and ever"* (Revelation 14:11). A pastor once told me that he had found a verse that showed that the fire of hell will one day be put out. Revelation 14:11 was that verse. He said in a somewhat triumphant way, "It's the *smoke* of their torment that ascends up forever and ever, not the fire itself." I asked, "When does smoke normally stop ascending from a fire?" He replied, "When the fire goes out." "Then obviously," I said, "the fire of hell must never go out because the smoke from it keeps on ascending forever." He didn't change his opinion, but neither was he being honest with his treatment of Scripture.

Hell and the Christian

Let these Biblical truths sink deep within your soul:

- Synonyms describing hell are graphic: *perdition* (II Peter 3:7), *condemnation* (Mark 3:29), *torment* (Luke 16:23, 28), *Lake of Fire and Second Death* (Revelation 20:14, 15), *everlasting fire* (Matthew 25:41), *unquenchable fire* (Matthew 3:12), *the blackness of darkness forever* (Jude 13), *furnace of fire* (Matthew 13:42, 50).

- Everyone without Christ stands before God already condemned: *He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already. . . . he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him*" (John 3:18, 36). When death claims such a person God's wrath falls and he is in that lost condition forever with no way out.

- There is no salvation apart from faith in Christ: *Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved* (Acts 4:12).

- We who know we have eternal life are God's vehicles for sharing the good news of salvation to those who are perishing. *For it is the*

God who commanded light to shine out of darkness who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (II Corinthians 4:6).

- Failure to share the Gospel is a most heinous sin: *Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame* (I Corinthians 15:34). Then add this: *Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin* (James 4:17).

Hell and the Unbeliever

If you who are reading these lines are not certain of going to heaven, you need to know that the only chance you have of escaping hell is here and now. There will be no opportunity to do so once you die.

You need do nothing to go to hell. Remember, he who does not believe in Christ is "condemned already" with God's wrath "abiding on him." But the answer to unbelief is belief. Jesus died for you; He paid the penalty owed by you for your sins, which is death or separation from God. Having done that on the cross, He arose three days later conquering sin and death, and now offers eternal life as a gift -- a *free love* gift -- to those who trust in Him for their salvation. Ephesians 2:8, 9 says, *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.* Won't you trust in Christ to save you right now? The Bible emphatically promises, *He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. . . .* (John 5:12, 13). ∞

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