

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 17, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

REVELATION 20:15

“If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

WHY I BELIEVE IN HELL (1)

I believe it is true to say that no doctrine of Christian theology is so repugnant to the unregenerate human mind as the biblical teaching concerning “hell.” Certainly, no Christian can experience anything but the utmost horror in contemplating the final abode of the impenitent. God Himself says in Ezekiel 33:11, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.”

The Apostle Paul, in his farewell address to the ruling elders at Ephesus, made this courageous statement — “Let me say plainly that no man’s blood can be laid at my door, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26-27) and as faithful Christians we must declare to our unsaved friends the whole counsel of God, painting for them a picture of two roads, one narrow, and one broad, leading at life’s end, to two destinations, heaven or hell.

I might tell you from my own experience that it was a sermon on “Hell” that convinced me, as a young boy, that I must flee to Jesus for mercy and for salvation.

Now let me say at the outset that:

1. A refusal to believe in hell involves three very significant presuppositions:

a. To believe that there is no hell presupposes that the Bible tells lies, for it categorically teaches the reality of hell. If Scripture is wrong about hell, then surely it could also be wrong about anything or everything else.

b. Disbelief in hell would presuppose that the Lord Jesus Christ is a liar, for He was far more explicit and adamant about the reality of hell than anyone else in the Bible. Now what is the fundamental reason why Christians believe anything? Surely it is because of the absolute and indisputable authority of the teachings of our Lord. But if there is no hell, then that authority of His is blatantly denied. Do you imagine for one moment that He Who is truth incarnate would come to earth to implant in people’s minds a fear of something that is nonexistent? Such a thought seriously impugns the moral perfection of our Lord.

c. If we drop belief in hell because it is unpalatable to us, then that presupposes that we, at will, can change whatever doctrines we find unacceptable or unbearable. This, of course, would mean that doctrine is negotiable; and that would make Christianity simply a human ideology, not a divine revelation. Christian doctrine would then become simply a nose of wax to

be twisted into any shape we choose. Try out this way of reasoning in any other branch of knowledge and see whether it makes a difference.

But not only must we face these three presuppositions. We must note in the second place that,

2. A refusal to believe in hell also involves at least four disastrous consequences:

a. If there is no hell, then life's choices no longer make any real difference. You may choose to live a good life, trusting Christ and seeking to do the will of God; or, you may choose to live a dissolute, even disgusting life. But it will make no difference in the end! Hitler and Stalin will end up in the same place as the Apostle Paul and Mother Teresa. Do you realize the hell it would be for Stalin to have to live beside the saintly Mother Teresa for all eternity?! C. S. Lewis said he never met a person who had a lively belief in heaven who did not also have a lively belief in hell. He said, "If a game is to be taken seriously, it must be possible to lose it."

b. If there is no hell to be saved from, then Jesus is not our Savior, but only our teacher, our example, our guru. If salvation is automatic, then Christ's death was not what He Himself said it was — an atonement for sin that enabled a holy God to still be holy and yet allow a sinner into heaven because that sinner is trusting in Christ alone for salvation from sin and hell. If salvation is automatic, then our Lord's death was a tragic accident and a stupid mistake.

c. If there is no hell, then a religious indifference must inevitably follow. If faith in Christ as Savior from sin and hell is not necessary, we should, in all honesty, recall all missionaries from around the world and apologize for all the Christian martyrs down through the centuries.

David Livingstone, the great missionary-explorer, used to say that it was the smoke from a thousand African villages that drove him on into the heart of that great continent, because he knew that the inhabitants of those villages would die and go out into a lost eternity because they had never been introduced to Jesus.

But if there is no such thing as fire, then fire departments are an utter waste of money. It is not insignificant to note that liberal mainline denominations that naively believe that all people will finally be saved, have, to all intents and purposes, given up their concern for world evangelization. As a sad example of this, I would remind you that the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. had 420 missionaries on the field as late as 1960. Today they have twenty.

d. If there is no reason for believing in the DETESTED doctrine of hell, there is also no reason to believe in the most BELOVED doctrine in Christianity; the doctrine that GOD is LOVE. The beloved doctrine is the reason critics most frequently give for not believing the detested doctrine; and yet the two stand on exactly the same foundation.

Why do we believe that God is love?

- We certainly don't know it by observing nature. You remember how Tennyson

speaks of “nature red in tooth and claw.” Nature doesn’t manifest love.

- Science can’t reveal God’s love. No scientific experiment has ever verified God’s love or measured or weighed it, or even observed it.

- Conscience can’t tell us anything about God’s love either. Conscience tells us what is right and wrong and warns us that we are absolutely obliged to do right and avoid wrong; but conscience does not and cannot tell us that we are forgiven. The Lord of the universe has imprinted His laws on the walls of our conscience, but those laws do not excuse us; they only accuse us. Only the Lord Himself can forgive.

- Again, history does not tell us anything about universal love. Do you know what history teaches? It teaches us the utter selfishness, sinfulness, cruelty, and perversity of everyone who lives on this planet. History is the record of the goodness of God, and how man has rebelled against that goodness ever since the Garden of Eden.

Let me tell you — there is only one reason that anyone ever came to the idea that God is love and that He freely offers mercy and forgiveness; and that reason is the character of God revealed in the Bible, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. But note this crucial fact — Jesus, Who is our only authority for believing that God is love, also assures us that there is a hell! He teaches us that God is love, and He also teaches us that there is a hell! Now, either we accept both these teachings on the same ground, or we reject them both on the same ground, because they stand on the same ground. You cannot possibly believe that Jesus teaches us that God is love and at the same time reject his teaching about hell.

It is interesting to note that the Bible gives us much less information about hell than about heaven. This, of course, is understandable for the simple reason that God designed us for heaven, not for hell. Indeed, hell was not prepared for us at all; it was prepared for the devil and his angels who rebelled against God and were thrown out of heaven. (Matthew 25:41) But if we follow Satan and his legions and defy and disobey the God Who created us and redeemed us, then our final abode will be with “our father the devil.” (John 8:44) When I say that God designed us for heaven, not for hell, a very simple illustration comes to mind. A travel agent tells you more about the beach resort you are supposed to go to than about the swamp by the side of the highway that you are not supposed to fall into!

Now, in the remainder of this sermon, I would like to clear the ground by mentioning some false notions about what hell is:

1. **There is a popular notion that hell exists, but only in this life.** For example, many survivors of the Holocaust would say that what happened then was hell on earth; and no doubt it was terrible beyond human description. But we must remember that the pains of this life end at death; but what Jesus warns against is a situation that has no end. Listen to what He says in Mark 9:43—44, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell where the fire never goes out.” So, our Lord graphically describes hell as a condition that lasts for all eternity.

2. Some teach that hell is not horrible and unending pain, but simply the annihilation of those who die in their sins. We are told that the impenitent, at death, are simply snuffed out, as if they had never existed. But we reject this idea for three reasons:

a. It is contrary to the plain words of Christ, Who, in speaking of the Day of Final Judgment, tells us that He will have to say to unrepentant sinners, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” (Matthew 25:41) There is no hint of annihilation in those solemn words.

b. This theory would make hell have an end, because once you are annihilated, all pain ends. But Christ affirms that hell involves an “eternal fire.”

c. The Bible teaches that the soul is immortal; it will live forever, either in heaven or in hell; so, to say that a soul can cease to exist is a contradiction in terms. It would be like saying that a circle can become a square.

3. Reincarnation is also a popular substitute for hell. In Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, there is no hell, but reincarnation is punishment, and in that sense functions as hell does in Christianity, but it is not eternal and hopeless. You live an evil life; you die; and later you may return to earth as a pig or a mouse! Later still, you may be reincarnated to a higher level of existence — perhaps a horse or a cougar. And after a painful and lengthy series of these reincarnations you become fit for “Nirvana” or “enlightenment” in the end. These reincarnations are like a purgatory which everyone endures to prepare them for final bliss. But reincarnation in fact denies not only hell, but free will also; because eventual “enlightenment” or “heaven” is predestined for you: You have no choice.

4. Hell is sometimes confused with limbo. “Limbo,” as you know, was invented by some Catholic theologians in their attempt to solve the problem of unbaptized infants who die. Such infants bear the guilt of original sin, and therefore, cannot enter heaven; but they have not consciously committed sins, and therefore, do not deserve hell. So “limbo” was invented as a pleasant sort of nursery for spiritual infants. The doctrine was never officially received by the Church, and most Catholic theologians today do not believe it. Certainly, limbo is not hell, for limbo is pleasant and hell is terrible. A “nursery” and “eternal fire” are two images that obviously symbolize things that are diametrically opposed.

5. Some have taught, or at least implied, that hell is forced on the damned, and that they are thrown into hell against their will.

But this is not true, because God has endowed us with free will. God gives to each human being the ability to choose, and God respects the choices we make. God loves us so much that He will never force anyone to go to heaven against his will. No one is ever forced to go either to heaven or to hell. A person goes to hell because he chooses self instead of God; sin instead of repentance.

Now, if hell is freely chosen, the problem is how to reconcile this with human sanity. Who would freely prefer hell to heaven unless they were insane? But you see, that is precisely

what sin is — a form of insanity which we bring upon ourselves by deliberately refusing the truth which God reveals to us in His Word — the truth about Himself, and the truth about ourselves.

Take a few illustrations from everyday life. A young person begins to smoke, knowing full well that he runs the risk of developing emphysema, or lung cancer, or vascular disease that can lead to a stroke or a heart attack. Perhaps years later he contracts emphysema, in which the cells of the lungs lose their elasticity, and he has to gasp for breath. But he keeps on smoking! And we say, “How insane can you get?” R. J. Reynolds founded his great tobacco empire in the 1870s; and his son died of emphysema. Now, just last week his grandson died of the same disease after years of torturing ill health. People see this, but they don’t learn from it.

Or a young teenager becomes a drug dealer, in the knowledge that he may very well get a bullet through his head from a rival drug dealer or a dissatisfied customer. But they don’t learn from that knowledge.

Or again, a teenager, or anyone, may engage in promiscuous sexual activity knowing very well that under those circumstances there is no such thing as “safe sex” (in spite of what our loony Surgeon General may say), and that he runs the very real risk of contracting AIDS. Do you know that AIDS is now the second greatest cause of teenage deaths in this country today? The first is automobile accidents, usually caused by alcohol; and the third is suicide. Accidents; AIDS; suicide. All the result of sins that need not have been committed.

So, the most shocking teaching found in the Bible is not the doctrine of hell; it is the doctrine of sin. It means that the human race is spiritually insane. We choose that which can only end in physical and spiritual death.

Do you ever find yourself doing things that you know are wrong and can only lead to catastrophe, but you do them anyway? If so, it just proves to you that what I’m saying is true. People choose death rather than life — and death without Christ means hell.

So, you can see that this is a very solemn subject which we have decided to explore. As the old evangelists used to say, “There is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned.” As the Scripture assures us, “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Hebrews 10:31)

I believe there is a hell because Jesus Christ not only taught it; He experienced it. On the Cross of Calvary, He bore the agony that we should have borne in hell for all eternity. But those who place their trust in His finished work of redemption have His assurance that they will never perish.

Have you that blessed assurance? Remember, if you are not trusting Christ and living in obedience to His will, the wrath of God will fall upon you in hell forever.

The choice is yours to make.

AMEN.