

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 24, 1994, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

1 PETER 4:17 and REVELATION 20:15

“How will it end for those who refuse to obey the Gospel?”

(N.E.B.)

“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 (2)

Our first text raises a question; the second answers it. “How will it end for those who refuse to obey the Gospel?” In other words, “Is there a hell for those who reject Christ?” God’s answer is, “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

I would like, in this sermon, to explore the biblical teaching concerning hell; and this involves the examination of four words in the Bible:

Sheol; Hades; Paradise and Gehenna.

1 & 2. SHEOL and HADES. We take these two words together because they mean the same thing. The Jewish people, like other ancient people, did not think of death as total extinction, a notion which is nowhere found in the Old or New Testaments. The traditional Jewish belief concerning death was most interesting. To the Jew, death meant a departure from this world of light and activity into the shadowy Kingdom of the underworld. They believed that the soul at death descended to a dark subterranean cavern known in Hebrew as “Sheol” and in Greek as “Hades”; an underworld prison-house where the soul of the departed, both good and evil, were assembled, in an atmosphere of sadness and gloom. Now the King James Version usually translates the word incorrectly as “Hell.” For example, Psalm 16:10, a Messianic passage, has Christ saying, “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.” The Revised Standard Version translates it properly — “For Thou dost not give me up to Sheol or let Thy Godly One see the Pit.” And the New International Version renders it, “You will not abandon Me to the grave, nor will You let Your Holy One see decay.” And Isaiah 14:15 reads, “But you are brought down to the grave (Sheol), to the depths of the Pit.” So Sheol means “the grave” or “the pit.”

There are two interesting verses in Jonah (2:1—2) in the K.J.V., “Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God out of the fish’s belly, and said, ‘I cried by reason of my affliction unto the Lord, and He heard me; out of the belly of hell I cried, and You heard my prayer.’ “The correct translation would be “out of the belly of Sheol I cried...” So, Jonah is likening the dark cavernous “innards” of the big fish to Sheol, the abode of the dead!

It was in Sheol that people were “gathered to their fathers,” to use an Old Testament phrase for “death.” The dead may not return to earth, but the living must eventually go to them.

In 2 Samuel 12:23, King David mourns the loss of his infant son with the words, “I will go to him, but he will not return to me.”

Death is the most democratic institution on earth. It comes to everyone regardless of color, education, wealth, or rank. The mortality rate of mankind is the same the world over: One death per person. The only exceptions we know of are Enoch and Elijah, both of whom were taken up into the presence of God without dying; and those believers who, living at the time of Christ’s second coming, will be transformed without passing through death.

However, it was held that upon occasion those in Sheol could be called up to earth again, for a time, by witchcraft. You remember the famous passage in 1 Samuel 28 where King Saul consulted a witch, who, at his request, brought up from the dead an old man wearing a robe, who turned out to be Samuel; and Samuel, as you will recall, spoke words of doom to the sinful king. You know, of course, that all arts of magic and witchcraft were regarded in Scripture as dreadfully wicked and were sternly denounced. There is no biblical sanction whatsoever for dabbling in spiritistic experimentation or dealing with “mediums” who profess to be able to communicate with the dead. Such activity is regarded as satanic and is regarded with horror in Scripture as an interference with the divinely appointed order of things.

But the real horror of death to the devout Jew lay in the fact that all fellowship with the Lord was at an end. God’s presence, indeed His interest, did not extend to Sheol. In Psalm 88:5 the psalmist laments, “I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom You remember no more, who are cut off from Your care.” That’s pretty grim stuff, isn’t it? Indeed, there is little in the Old Testament which even hints at a liberation or resurrection from Sheol.

There are only two passages that I know of in the Old Testament which speak clearly about life after death as anything better than the shadowy existence in Sheol. There is that beautiful verse in Isaiah 26:19 which says, “But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy.” And in Daniel 12:2 we read that “multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake; some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.”

By New Testament times belief in the resurrection of the dead was held by all Jews except the die-hard Sadducees, who accepted only the first five books of the Old Testament as Scripture; and since any doctrine of resurrection does not appear in those books, the Sadducees refused to believe that the dead would rise again.

Why then did the Jews come to believe in the resurrection of the dead? It was because of their growing belief that God must one day vindicate and reward His faithful people who, through the centuries, had suffered such cruel persecutions at the hands of pagan Gentiles. When the oppressors’ cup of wickedness was full to the brim, the Lord would come to judge the earth. The righteous, though dead, would not lose their reward, nor would the wicked escape their punishment.

So, since there would be a final Judgment, it was concluded that Sheol or Hades was divided into separate quarters, so that the righteous and the wicked should be separated by an

impassable gulf, even before the final Judgment. The pleasant abode of the righteous dead was called —

3. PARADISE. This was originally a Persian word meaning “a noblemen’s park or garden.” The Jews often used the word to refer to the original Garden of Eden in which was situated the tree of life. You remember how, in His second word from the Cross, our Lord said to the repentant criminal, “Today you will be with Me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43) There is no support in the New Testament for the speculation of some Rabbis that paradise was a place of cleansing, a sort of purgatory, where souls are purified from sin and made fit for heaven.

So, the souls of the righteous went to Paradise. However, the other section of the place of the dead, the section reserved for those who had died in their sins, continued to be called “Hades;” and “Paradise” and “Hades” were separated by an impassable gulf.

Our Lord, in Luke 16:19-31 gives us a vivid description of those two places, in His story about the rich man and Lazarus, who both died. Lazarus, a poor but godly beggar man, went to “Abraham’s side,” a synonym for Paradise; while the rich man, who had obviously lived an ungodly life, died and was buried. Jesus tells us that “in Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So, he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things; but now he is comforted, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’” (Luke 19:23-26)

So “Hades,” in contrast to “Paradise,” is the place to which the wicked dead go to await the final judgment. Jesus teaches that separation, punishment, pain, and privation begin in Hades, as is evident from the awful plight of the rich man.

This brings us to our fourth and final word:

4. GEHENNA which is properly translated “Hell,” and which means the final destiny and abode of those who die in their sins. Jesus used the word ten times to describe the final abode and doom of the impenitent. The word is a transliteration of the Hebrew words “Ge Hinnom.” This was the name for “the Valley of Hinnom” situated in the southeast environs of the city of Jerusalem. The word “hinnom” is the Hebrew word meaning “lamentation.” So “Ge Hinnom” or “Gehenna” literally means “The Valley of Lamentation.” It received this name because during the days of the evil Kings Ahaz and Manasseh, some Jews erected in the valley a temple to the Canaanite fire god Molech (Jeremiah 7:31). Worshipping Molech included heating the image of Molech until it was red hot, and then putting a baby in the arms of the idol and burning it to death. This, of course, brought screams from the babies and blood-curdling wailings from the horrified and heart-broken mothers; and so, the place received its name, “Gehenna,” the “Valley of Lamentation.”

Later, King Josiah, a godly ruler, destroyed the temple of Molech, and always

afterwards, the valley where the pagan temple had stood, became utterly abhorrent to the Jews because of the child sacrifices which had been practiced there; and indeed, the place became so despised that the city of Jerusalem made it the dumping ground for all the trash and garbage of the city. And in the time of our Lord they kept fires burning continuously to keep the place sanitary. So, the smoke and stench of the area were a byword for something that is abominable; and so the very word “Gehenna” offered a way to express the idea of the eternal destruction of the wicked.

It is significant that this word is found ten times in the Gospels, and in every instance, it is uttered by our Lord Himself to describe the final abode of those who reject Him. Let me give you one very solemn example of our Lord’s use of this word. In Luke 12:4&5 Jesus says, “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you Whom you should fear. Fear Him Who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him.” The One, of course, Who has power to cast into Gehenna, is God Himself, and not Satan. In Hebrews 2:14 the writer speaks of “him who holds the power of death, that is the devil.” But though Satan may have power over death, the New Testament always places the final authority over human beings in the hands of God.

We should note also that Gehenna is closely associated with “fire” in our Lord’s teaching. We think of Mark 9:47&48 where He says, “And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”

Christians may differ on what is meant by “fire,” whether it should be interpreted literally or figuratively. I think everyone would agree that the awful picture of “fire” speaks of a place of extreme misery. Dr. Robert G. Lee, the famous Baptist preacher of a generation ago, once said, “If the fire of hell can be proven to be figurative, hell will be no less unendurable. All who believe they can prove the fire of hell is not literal fire, have only removed physical pain, which is the least significant feature of its character. Hell is the madhouse of the universe where remorse and an accusing memory cause unspeakable torture.”

We can see, can’t we, that it is impossible to soften the severity of Jesus’ warning against unrepented sin; and the sentimentalism that seeks to do so is a distortion of the teaching of our Lord and of the New Testament as a whole? Whatever may be implied by the symbolism of “unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:17), of the casting of the wicked into “the furnace of fire” (Matthew 13:42,50), we have no right to explain the symbolism away. From the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by the fires of judgment (Genesis 19:24), fire had been the biblical symbol of destruction, condemnation and punishment, and so it continued to be in the New Testament.

So, we might say, in conclusion, that hell means three things:

1. **It means punishment.** A mother says to her child, “If you eat those cookies before supper, you will spoil your appetite.” Or she says to her sixteen-year-old who has just received his driver’s license, “If you drive 90 miles an hour, you’ll wrap yourself around a telephone pole.” We know that if someone jumps off a high cliff, he will surely die. And you can say to anyone, “If you are a promiscuous, sexually active homosexual, you will almost inevitably

contract AIDS.” If a cog gets out of place in a piece of machinery, it will grind itself to powder.

Think, for a moment, of God’s command to Adam and Eve not to eat the forbidden fruit. They defied and disobeyed God, and ate it, and we know what happened. And if we eat the forbidden fruit of disobedience to God’s will, divorcing our will and spirit from God’s will, then the inevitable result will be disaster and death, because doing God’s will is the only source of life and joy. In a very real sense virtue is its own reward, and vice is its own punishment. Virtue is to the soul what health is to the body. You see, the natural universe has been constructed by God in such a fashion that “natural law” is a stubborn reality.

The punishment of hell is inevitable, by natural law. Any human soul that freely and deliberately refuses the one Source of all life and joy must find death and misery as its inevitable punishment. C. S. Lewis, in his book, The Problem of Pain, makes the point most clearly: “Though our Lord often speaks of hell as a sentence inflicted by a tribunal, He also says elsewhere that the judgment consists in the very fact that men prefer darkness to light, and that not He, but His “word” judges men (John 3:19; 12:48). We are, therefore, at liberty — since the two conceptions, in the long run, mean the same thing — to think of this bad man’s perdition not as a sentence imposed on him, but as the mere fact of being himself...”

In Holman Hunt’s famous painting, “The Light of the World,” Jesus stands, with lantern in hand, outside the closed door of a cottage. There is no knob on the outside of the door, indicating that only from the inside can the door of the soul be opened, freely, to goodness and truth and joy and abundant life. And only from the inside can it be locked. If we lock that door, and keep Jesus out, our folly is its own eternal punishment.

2. It means pain. Since only God can give joy, then to turn one’s back on God can only bring pain. And so, hell must have the aspect of pain as well as punishment. If God is joy, hell must be pain — both external and internal pain. The internal pain would be far worse than external pain, just as internal and spiritual joys far exceed any physical external pleasures. Therefore, the old question of whether there is physical fire in hell really becomes a moot point. When our soul is in deep pain and despair, we may hit our head against the wall. Why? Because physical pain is not as bad as spiritual pain, and it distracts us from the worse pain, the spiritual.

3. It means privation — we are deprived of God. This does not mean that God shuts us out, but that we shut Him out. This aspect of hell is really the cause of the other two. It is only because we deprive ourselves of God that hell is painful; and it is only because we deprive ourselves of God that we suffer the just punishment which comes inevitably when we refuse God’s love to us in Christ. The desire to experience joy without submitting to God’s will, is doomed to failure and pain and inevitable punishment because God is not one among many sources of joy; He is the only ultimate source of all joy. Everything in the world that gives us true and lasting joy is like a sunbeam that comes from Christ Who is “the Sun of Righteousness. (Hal. 4:2) All our joys are reflections of God. Therefore, to deprive ourselves of God is not to deprive ourselves of just some joy, but of all joy. And of all hell’s aspects, this is the most terrible — to deprive ourselves of the joy of God’s loving friendship for all eternity.

May that not be the final and inevitable doom of anyone here this morning.

AMEN.