

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Scripture Memory</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	127		Gary L.W. Johnson
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### ON DEATH AND DYING (Part 1)

During the final year of my Ph.D studies at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, I taught in the philosophy department at Gwynedd Mercy University, a Roman Catholic institution (I was the only faculty member who was a Protestant). The first course I was assigned to teach was A Theology of Suffering: Thanatology (from the Greek word *Thanatos*, a name for the personification of death. Thanatos was the son of Nyx, the goddess of night, and the brother of Hynos, the god of sleep). The syllabus that the previous professor had used relied heavily on the work of the noted psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, which deals with The Five Stages of Dying and Subsequent Models of Grief. Her work has been highly influential. She was not a Christian, but saw herself in a constructive, New Age way as being some sort of medium able to contact the dead. As she got older and began to see her own mortality, she became increasingly angry and disillusioned with God. Most of my class lectures were designed to present an alternative Biblical perspective on the subject of death and dying.<sup>1</sup> “The best moment of the Christian Life,” declared Charles Spurgeon, “is his last one, because it is the one that is nearest to heaven.” Spurgeon got this from one of his favorite Puritan preachers, Thomas Brooks, who said, “A *believer’s dying day is his best day*, and why then should he be unwilling to die? Eccles. 7:1, *A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one’s birth*. In respect of profit, pleasure, peace, safety, company, glory, a believer’s last day is his best day; and when then should a believer be unwilling to die? In a printed sermon on this very text I have proved this truth at large, and to that I refer you who desire further satisfaction about this truth.”<sup>2</sup> There is, according to the Bible, a future state. For the believer it will be glorious, but for the unbeliever it will be dreadful.

“The ultimate horror of God’s universe,” writes Wenham, “is hell. The other difficulties of the Bible and of Providence are real enough, but however appalling they may be, their seeming harshnesses and injustices are only temporary, cut short at death. The terrors of hell, on the other hand, belong to the world which lies beyond death. For a single being to endure pain hopelessly and unendingly, or even to pass out of existence and forfeit forever the joys of heaven, is more terrible than any temporal suffering.”<sup>3</sup> Christians are committed to the teaching of Christ; Christ taught the existence of hell with a wealth of terrifying images; it is best to let these images speak for themselves, leaving further comment to those who can discuss the issues at length. Yet this is not a mere academic exercise, it is an attempt to grapple with the heart’s cry of contemporary man who wants to know what to believe about God. If the biblical imagery is left undiscussed, there is no guarantee that he will interpret first-century images correctly. Twentieth-century man does not and cannot come to the Bible with an empty mind. The very word “hell” comes to us laden with literary and artistic associations of many centuries. The early Church did not mince words when it came to this subject. The Second Council of Constantinople (553 AD) censored the noted Church father Origen for his treatment on hell, declaring, “If anyone says or thinks that the punishment of demons and of impious men is only temporary and will one day have an end . . . let him be anathema.” Traditional orthodoxy was based on a number of seemingly plain scriptures, mostly derived from Jesus’ own teaching in the Gospels. Jesus spoke of the rich man in Hades, tormented by the flame, wishing the beggar Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool his tongue, but told of the great chasm between them which no

one could cross. Jesus also spoke of unquenchable fire, of the undying worm and the wailing and gnashing of teeth of Gehenna. Most strikingly of all, he used precisely the same adjective in the same sentence when speaking of “eternal (or everlasting) life” and of “eternal (or everlasting) punishment.” Having declared that on the day of judgment the Son of man would say to those at his left hand, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,” he concludes his solemn statement with the words: “They will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” The same teaching, but spelt out in even stronger terms, is given in the Revelation of John, where it is said of those who worship the beast that “the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever.” Later on it says: “the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” This expression “for ever and ever” is repeatedly used in Revelation for the reign of God and of the saints; it seems logical therefore to infer that the torments of the lost are as unending as the bliss of the redeemed. People who want to believe in heaven but not hell have an embarrassing time with the Jesus we meet in the pages of the New Testament. “There seems to be a kind of conspiracy,” writes novelist Dorothy Sayers, “to forget, or to conceal, where the doctrine of hell comes from. The doctrine of hell is not *mediaeval priestcraft* for frightening people into giving money to the church: it is Christ’s deliberate judgment on sin. . . . We cannot repudiate Hell without altogether repudiating Christ.” In *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis writes of Hell, “There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of our Lord’s own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason.”<sup>4</sup>

- I. **LIFE AFTER DEATH: THE FATE OF THE LOST.** Luke 16:19-31. The KJV reads that the rich man died and was buried “and in *hell* he lifted up his eyes.” This is a very unfortunate translation. The Greek word *Hāidēi*, which should be translated *Hades*, and is a compound of two Greek words – the infinitive “to see” and the alpha privative/negative, which means “not to see.” Hades, then, means the *unseen* world as compared to this *visible* one. It meant for those who first used it the unseen world inhabited by the spirits of dead men – good or bad.<sup>5</sup>
- A. ***This is a conscious state.*** Peter Toon writes, “In the afterlife, to the surprise of the rich man, the position of the two men is reversed. Lazarus is seated next to Abraham at the banquet, with his head on the bosom of the patriarch (v. 22). This is a picture of bliss. In contrast, the rich man, as he had expected, found himself in Hades, the place and sphere of the departed, but it was not the Hades of his previous theology. It was Hades (as some Jewish apocalyptic had taught) divided into Gehenna and Paradise (or places approximating to these), and there was a great chasm between the two halves of Hades. This parable is merely a story, told for purposes other than establishing a doctrine of the afterlife. This said, it is difficult to avoid concluding that Jesus did himself believe that life after death, both before and after the final judgment, will involve either enjoyment or deprivation of the presence of God and his faithful people.”<sup>6</sup>
- B. ***This is a horrible state.*** It is called a place of torment. A condition of suffering. Hodge notes the figurative term used by Scripture includes, “Everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. -- Matt. 25:41. The hell of fire, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. -- Mark 9:44. The lake which burneth with fire and brimstone. -- Rev. 21:8. Bottomless pit. -- Rev. 9:2. The dreadful nature of this abode of the wicked is implied in such expressions as *outer darkness*, the place *where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth*, Matt. 8:12; *I am tormented in this flame*, Luke 16:24; *unquenchable fire*, Luke 3:17; *furnace of fire*, Matt. 13:42; *blackness of darkness*, Jude 13; *torment in fire and brimstone*, Rev. 14:10; *the smoke of their torment ascendeth forever and ever, and they have no rest day nor night*, Rev. 14:11.”<sup>7</sup>
- C. ***This is a fixed state.*** Some have tried to soften the force of Jesus’ teaching by denying that it should be taken at face value. Some of these attempts to air condition Hell include universalism (everybody is saved in the end, and all roads lead to Heaven),

annihilationism (sometime after death a person's soul simply ceases to exist), and viewing Hell as merely a place of spiritual torment rather than physical. Some will go so far as to deny Hell altogether. They maintain that books about Hell, including the Bible, belong on the same shelf as books about werewolves, vampires, and Harry Potter. Hell is fiction, fantasy, and fake.<sup>8</sup> Boettner noted that, "Jesus gave the stern warning, *Except ye believe that I am he, ye shall die in your sins*, John 8:24. On four different occasions He declared that after the rejection of the opportunity afforded in this life *there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth*, Matt. 13:42, the parable of the tares; Matt. 22:13, the parable of the wedding feast and the slighted invitations; Matt. 24:51, the parable of the unfaithful servant; and Matt. 25:30, the parable of the talents. This hard saying obviously indicates absolute misery in a permanent condition, and His repeated use of it shows His concern that it be deeply impressed upon our minds. It shows further that He was aware of the inclination among men to soften the absolute antithesis between salvation and an eternally lost spiritual condition."<sup>9</sup> Robert Morey points out that, "The rabbinic literature before, during, and after the time of Christ is filled with parables which built imaginative stories around real historical characters. There are multiple examples in the Talmud and Midrash of parables in which Abraham had dialogues with people such as Nimrod, with whom he could never have spoken literally. Everyone understood that these parables and dialogues did not literally take place. It was understood that the rabbis used imaginative stories and dialogues as a teaching method. It was understood by all that these dialogues never took place. Therefore, it does not bother us in the least to say that Christ used a rabbinic story and dialogue in Luke 16:19-31 which was not *true* or *real* in the sense of being literal. It is obvious that Lazarus did not literally sit in Abraham's literal bosom. The rich man did not have literal lips which literal water could quench. What is important for us to grasp is that Christ used the mental images conjured up by this rabbinic parable to teach that, in the hereafter, the wicked experience torment and the righteous bliss. This is clear from the rabbinic sources from which he drew this parable. Since the dialogue between the rich man and Abraham was a teaching tool used by the rabbis before Christ, it is obvious that Christ was not trying to teach that we will talk with the wicked in the hereafter. He was merely using the dialogue method to get across the concept that there is no escape from torment, no second chance, and we must believe the Scriptures in *this* life unto salvation."<sup>10</sup>

- D. ***This is an incomplete state.*** Summers notes that, "Those in this state are conscious; they have begun to endure the penalty of their wicked lives; this penalty will be consummated in the experience of the resurrection and final judgment. It should be observed carefully that here, as in the case of the disembodied righteous, there is no basis for belief in any form of purgatorial cleansing through suffering so as to prepare the individual for a better state. Apocatastasis of this type is foreign to the text of the New Testament."<sup>11</sup> B. F. Westcott cautions that, "In considering these phases it is necessary to premise that in spiritual things we must guard against all conclusions which rest upon the notion of succession and duration. . . . It is not an endless duration of time, but being of which time is not a measure. We have indeed no power to grasp the idea except through forms and images of sense."<sup>12</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Boettner soberly declared, "The Bible not only gives no hint of any cessation of the punishment of the wicked but declares in the strongest terms its endlessness. It is said to be *eternal, everlasting*. These words are the strongest of any in the Greek language. These same words are used to express the eternity of God, and to describe the duration of the blessed condition of the righteous in heaven. *Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever*, 1 Tim. 1:17. *He that believeth . . . hath eternal life*, John 5:24. *I give unto them eternal life*, John 10:28. *The free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord*, Rom. 6:23. *Depart from me, ye cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the Devil and his*

angels . . . And these shall go away into eternal punishment: but the righteous into eternal life, Matt. 25:41, 46. In this latter verse the same Greek word is used in both clauses. The wicked are to go *eis kolasin aionion*, and the righteous *eis zoen aionion*; hence the meaning must be the same in both cases. The word *aionion* is used in the New Testament seventy-two times, and always it denotes indefinite, unbounded, eternal duration. The judgment scene of Matt. 25:31-46 implies the continued existence of both the righteous and the wicked.”<sup>13</sup> I close with these words from Calvin: “Now because no description can deal adequately with the gravity of God’s vengeance against the wicked, their torments and tortures are figuratively expressed to us by physical things, that is by darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12; 22:13), unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:12; Mark 9:43; Isa. 66:24), and undying worm gnawing at the heart (Isa. 66:24). By such expressions the Holy Spirit certainly intended to confound all our senses with dread. . . . As by such details we should be enabled in some degree to conceive the lot of the wicked, so we ought especially to fix our thoughts upon this: how wretched it is to be cut off from all fellowship with God. And not that only, but so to feel his sovereign power against you that you cannot escape being pressed by it. For first, his displeasure is like a raging fire, devouring and engulfing everything it touches. Secondly, all creatures so serve him in the execution of his judgment that they to whom the Lord will openly show his wrath will feel heaven, earth, sea, living beings and all that exists aflame, as it were, with dire anger against them and armed to destroy them.”<sup>14</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The late David Powlison (a classmate of mine at Westminster Theological Seminary), provides his typical refreshing and consistent Biblical approach to Kuber-Ross over at “Feeding On Christ:” <https://feedingonchrist.org/david-powlison-on-the-five-stages-of-grief/>

<sup>2</sup> *The Works of Thomas Brooks* I (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1980), p. 455. Brooks in turn acknowledges that his source for this was the early Church father, Ambrose.

<sup>3</sup> J. W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (IVP, 1974), p. 27. I have adapted this section from pp. 27-29. Sadly, Wenham goes on to embrace a form of conditional immortality that allows for annihilationism.

<sup>4</sup> As cited by Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Tyndale, 2004), p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> I like the way Kenneth Wuest renders this text, “And it came to pass that the beggar died and was carried off by the angels to become a partaker of blessedness with Abraham in paradise. And the rich man also died and was entombed. And in the unseen world of departed human beings, having lifted up his eyes, being in torments, he sees Abraham afar off, and Lazarus enjoying the blessedness of paradise with him. And he himself cried out and said, *Father Abraham, be sympathetic towards my misery and do something for me at once, and send Lazarus directly in order that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, because I am in anguish in this flame.*” K. S. Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation* (Eerdmans, 1961), p. 181.

<sup>6</sup> P. Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview* (Thomas Nelson, 1986), p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 580.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Masters Seminary blog <https://www.tms.edu/blog/horrors-and-habitat-of-hell/>

<sup>9</sup> L. Boettner, *Immortality* (P&R, 1956), p. 106.

<sup>10</sup> R. Morey, *Death and The Afterlife* (Bethany House, 1984), p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> Ray Summers, *The Life Beyond* (Broadman, 1959), p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 215.

<sup>13</sup> Boettner, op. cit., p. 118.

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* III, XXV, 12.