

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	128		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	2 Thessalonians 1:9		
Date:	March 9, 2025 (a.m.)		

ON DEATH AND DYING (Part 2)

Rob Bell, one of the more high-profile voices in what is usually identified as the progressive wing of the Christian church, created a firestorm with his book, *Love Wins*.¹ *The NY Times*, *CNN*, and *USA Today* have taken notice of Bell's controversial book. Bell advocates a very subtle form of universalism, i.e., in the end everybody will be in heaven. One of the most dangerous errors in Bell's book is the categorical denial of any notion of penal substitutionary atonement. Bell denies the reality of God's wrath against sin. He rejects the biblical picture of the cross of Christ as a wrath-bearing sacrifice for sin (Romans 3:25), that Jesus was actually *smitten of God* (Isaiah 53:4, 10) and was *cursed* by God (Galatians 3:13). Bell declares: "Many people have heard the gospel framed in terms of rescue. God has to punish sinners, because God is holy, but Jesus has paid the price for our sin, and so we can have eternal life. However, true or untrue that is technically or theologically, what it can do is subtly teach people that Jesus rescues us from God. Let's be very clear then: we do not need to be rescued from God" (p. 182). This is stunning. Among other things, Bell is explicitly denying that sin is a serious violation of the Law of God and as such deserves God's wrath.

Rob Bell does not like the idea of God being angry, because he thinks of anger as a sin. But God's anger is not like ours. He does not lose his temper. His wrath is the inevitable outworking of his holiness and justice, as it was with the Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 3:5).² Claims that our anger is without sin may well conceal wounded pride. But God cannot be guilty of sin. His judgments are *always* righteous. As the apostle says, on *the day of God's wrath . . . his righteous judgment will be revealed* (Romans 2:5). Bell can't understand how God can be angry and loving at the same time. But God's displeasure with sin and his love for sinners are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the sending of Jesus to turn God's anger away from us is the greatest possible expression of his love, which is exactly what the apostle John said: *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice (propitiation) for our sins* (1 John 4:10 and John 3:16). Likewise, we must not think that by his sacrifice Jesus *persuaded* his Father not to be angry with us, and to change his anger into love. It was God himself who presented Jesus as a propitiation for our sins *so as to be just and the one who justifies the man who has faith in Jesus* (Romans 3:25, 26). God was under no obligation to save us from his wrath, but once having determined to do so, the death of his beloved Son was the only way. God's law *must* be fulfilled and only Jesus could do that. Sonship, union and heirship are the blessings delivered by faith in Christ. The Law cannot give us these things – it can, however, bring us to Christ by showing us the seriousness of sin. The pressing question is this: Have *you* come face to face with the Law so that you clearly see your sin, guilt and condemnation? And have you fled to Christ as your only Savior? The Old Puritan divine Ezekiel Hopkins long ago wrote: "We cannot be personally righteous by perfect Obedience, because of the corruption of our natures: we cannot be personally righteous by full Satisfaction, because of the condition of our natures. Our corrupt state makes our perfect obedience a thing impossible; and our limited finite state makes our full satisfaction as impossible. As we are fallen sinners, we lie under a sad necessity of transgressing the Law; as we are vile creatures, so we lie under an utter incapacity of recompensing divine justice. Well, therefore, might the Apostle cry out, *There is none righteous: no, not one* (Rom. 3:10). As for a personal righteousness of obedience, the Prophet unfolds that goodly garment: Isa. 64:6: *All our righteousness are but as filthy rags: rags they are; and, therefore, cannot cover our nakedness: filthy*

ragged they are; and, therefore, need a covering for themselves. To think to cover filth by filth, is nothing else but to make both more odious in the sight of God. Nor can we hope to appear before God upon a Righteousness of Satisfaction: for how should we satisfy his justice? Is it by Doing? Whatsoever we can do is God's gift: our own duty, had we never sinned; and can bear no proportion to the sin committed: for no duty is of infinite goodness; but every sin is of infinite heinousness, as hath been demonstrated; and therefore no duty can make satisfaction for it. Is it by Suffering that we hope we may satisfy God? Alas! this is nothing else, but to seek salvation by being damned: for that is the penal part of the Law; and the only personal satisfaction that the justice of God will exact of sinners."³ According to Rob Bell it really does not matter one way or the other. The Bible says otherwise. John Lennon's song, which was recently played at President Jimmy Carter's funeral, has this refrain:

Imagine there's no heaven;
It's easy if you try.
No hell below us –
Above us only sky.

Was Lennon right? Can we dismiss hell as what one religious leader called "only a figment of the theological imagination?" Surely it is massively important that we find out? What if the traditional pictures of hell as a place of endless punishment and suffering are true? What if millions of people are on their way there? What if we are? And if we are, is there any way of getting off the road, or lessening the punishment we shall have to endure in hell, or shortening the length of time we shall spend there? Is there any way in which we can avoid hell, or evade it?⁴

- I. **BACKGROUND: HELL IN CHURCH HISTORY.** The traditional doctrine of hell was developed in the earliest centuries of Christian history. Based in the New Testament texts concerning hell, judgment, and the afterlife, the earliest Christian preachers and theologians understood hell to be the just judgment of God on sinners without faith in Christ. Hell was understood to be spatial and eternal, characterized by the most awful biblical metaphors of fire and torment. Following the example of Jesus, the early Christian evangelists and preachers called sinners to faith in Christ and warned of the sure reality of hell and the eternal punishment of the impenitent. Thomas Oden summarizes the patristic consensus on hell as this: *Hell is the eternal bringing to nothing of corruption and ungodliness. Hell expresses the intent of a holy God to destroy sin completely and forever. Hell says not merely a temporal no but an eternal no to sin. The rejection of evil by the holy God is like a fire that burns on, a worm that dies not.* As Oden notes, the terms "eternal fire" and "eternal punishment" are very common. These terms "have withstood numerous attempts at generous reinterpretation, but they remain obstinately in the received text." A central example is Augustine, who encouraged his readers to take the biblical metaphors quite literally. Beyond this, Augustine was stalwart in his refutation of those who taught that the punishments of hell were not truly eternal: Moreover, is it not folly to assume that eternal punishment signifies a fire lasting a long time, while believing that eternal life is without end? For Christ, in the very same passage, included both punishment and life in one and the same sentence when he said, "So those people will go into eternal punishment, while the righteous will go into eternal life." (Matt. 25:46). If both are "eternal," it follows necessarily that either both are to be taken as long-lasting but finite, or both as endless and perpetual. The first major challenge to the traditional doctrine of hell came from Origen, whose doctrine of *apokatastasis* promised the total and ultimate restitution of all things and all persons. Thus, Origen was the pioneer of a form of universalism. His logic was that God's victory would only be complete when the last things are identical to the first things. That is, the consummation would involve the return of all things to union with the Creator. Nothing (and no one) could be left unredeemed. Beyond this, in *Against Celsus*, Origen responded to one of the church's Greek critics by denying that hell would be punitive, at least in the end. Instead, hell would be purifying and thus temporal. Origen's teaching was a clear rejection of the patristic consensus, and the church responded in 553 at the fifth ecumenical council (Constantinople II) with a series of anathemas against Origen and his teaching. The ninth anathema set the refutation

in undeniable clarity: “If anyone says or thinks that the punishment of demons and of impious men is only temporary, and will one day have an end, and that a restoration [*apokatastasis*] will take place of demons and of impious men, let him be anathema. This general consensus held well through the medieval and Reformation eras of the church. Rejections of the traditional doctrine were limited to peripheral sects and heretics, and hell was such a fixture of the medieval mind that most persons understood all of life in terms of their ultimate destination by God’s judgment. Men and women longed for heaven and feared hell. Yet by the end of the twentieth century, inhabitants of those lands once counted as Christendom lived with virtually no fear of hell as a place of eternal punishment, and no fear of divine judgment.”⁵

II. **PROPOSED ALTERNATIVES.**

- A. Conditional immortality – annihilationism – teaches that the Biblical images used to convey eternal punishment actually mean the termination of existence, i.e., final, and irreversible destruction. The fire of Hell does not torture but actually consumes the wicked. This position lacks exegetical support and is based more upon assumptions about the character of God, and ideas of what constitutes punishment than upon any detailed treatment of the Biblical text. Clark Pinnock and Robert Brow, two self-proclaimed advocates of the heresy known as open-view theism, proclaim proudly, “Not only is conditional immortality more biblical than a view of hell as everlasting conscious punishment, but it has other advantages as well. First, it does not impute to God the sadistic behavior of torturing people endlessly. God as revealed in Christ is merciful and does not torture people – period. How could one respect, let alone worship, a torturing God? John Stott rightly admits: *I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain.*”⁶

CONCLUSION: John Wenham, who is sympathetic to the view of conditional immortality, is nevertheless aware that this position could be a dangerous cul-de-sac. He offers five caveats to those who might be tempted to abandon the traditional view too easily:

1. Beware of the immense natural appeal of any way out that evades the idea of everlasting sin and suffering. The temptation to twist what may be quite plain statements of Scripture is intense. It is the ideal situation for unconscious rationalizing.
2. Beware of the pervasive and insidious influence of the present liberal *Zeitgeist* on all our thinking. . . . Such a doctrine as unending torment would inevitably be a natural point for merciless attack in a climate of opinion committed to the elimination of everything offensive to modern sentiment.
3. Note that the modern revival of conditionalism was pioneered mainly by Socinians and Arians, who rejected such fundamental doctrines as the deity of Christ, and that today it constitutes an important element in the teaching of Jehovah’s Witnesses and Christadelphians. Be wary of such bedfellows.
4. Note that the adoption of conditionalism, even if it can be accepted as a possible interpretation of the Bible, does not solve all the difficulties. It can never be easy to accept the idea that God will decree the annihilation of beings made in his own image, nor that he will decree pain that will be of no benefit to the sufferer. . . .
5. Beware of weakening zeal for the gospel. The gospel should be preached with passionate urgency. One who has believed that the alternative to faith in Christ is unending misery in hell may well find that the sudden loss of confidence in the doctrine will leave him deflated, with the edge of his evangelistic zeal impaired.

Let us hope that he will be heard and this matter seriously and reverently discussed by theologians and pastors.⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and The Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (Harper One, 2011).

² Michael Horton observes that, Like mercy, grace, and patience, jealousy and wrath are aroused only in the context of an offense. God does not need to display these attributes in order to be who he is, but they are the response we would expect from the kind of God who is good, just, and holy. Just as God “has mercy on whomever he wills,” he also “hardens whomever he wills” (Rom. 9:18). *God must be just, but he is free to display his mercy toward some and his wrath toward others* (v. 22). Even when God expresses his wrath, it is not the ill-tempered and irrational violence that is associated with the eruption of human emotion. God’s wrath always expresses his wisdom and judgment – and even his love, which along with his other attributes has been accosted by those whom he created for love and to love. A being who is perfect in goodness and love *must* exercise wrath against sin, evil, hatred, and injustice. *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on The Way* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 270.

³ *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins II* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), p. 144.

⁴ John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened To Hell?* (Crossway, 1995), p. 20.

⁵ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Modern Theology: The Disappearance of Hell” in *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvent Eternal Punishment*, eds. C. W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Zondervan, 2004), pp. 16-18.

⁶ C. H. Pinnock & R. C. Brow, *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century* (IVP, 1994), p. 92.

⁷ As cited in Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview* (Thomas Nelson, 1986), p. 177.