

Hell

In today's Gospel (Matthew 5:21-37), Jesus mentions hellfire and hell. It is sad, but not everyone will end up experiencing that eternal joy with Christ and the saints and the angels. For as real as heaven is for those who die trusting in the victory Christ won over our sin and our death, just so real is the hell that Jesus said was "*prepared for the devil and his angels*" (Matthew 25:41). To that place/condition of eternal torment go all those who have not believed the message of the Gospel.

What the Bible tells us about hell is just as serious as what it tells us about heaven. It is a favourite trick of the devil, one that he uses with great success, to seduce people into thinking that God would never send anyone into eternal torment. People like to think like that when they are looking for an easy escape from struggle against sin or against a condemning conscience.

One practice all too common these days that makes it easy for those living in their sins to dismiss thoughts of hell's reality is a church funeral for people who have openly lived contrary to God's Law and apart from His Gospel. What an insult to God and His Word! How will those who conduct such funerals ever answer on the day of judgment? For they have proclaimed to all attending that God is a joker whose Word means nothing. They have built iron doors on hearts where the Holy Spirit would pound with the Law to work a repentance that longs for forgiveness in the Gospel. But why bother with repentance? Why bother with a Christian struggle in this life? Why bother with the Gospel? If after death even those who despised the Law and treated with contempt the great sacrifice of Christ end up in the lap of the Father and in the arms of the Son they despised, then the whole of God's Word is worthy of contempt!

No, it will not do to dismiss what God has to say about hell. Rather, the Christian should pay heed lest he too be deceived into thinking that God is not serious about His Word. He should pay heed lest he grow careless in his Christian struggle. He should pay heed lest he become indifferent to the mission of the church and, therefore, of each Christian to share the Gospel at home and through all the world, that souls may be delivered from hell for heaven by its saving message. For just as the Christian struggle makes little sense if there is no hell (after all, the loss of heaven may not be all that bad if the alternative is nothingness), so the sharing of the Gospel won't be all that urgent for those who imagine that there is no hell from which the Gospel delivers us.

What then is hell? It is by definition eternal death, that is, an eternal separation from God's grace and mercy. As long as we are alive in this world we can never be completely separated from God's goodness. For, as Jesus said, God "*causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous*" (Matthew 5:45). Every breath we take is

evidence of God's goodness to all. Indeed, each day of our lives is a gift of God intended to point us to the purpose of life, namely, that we should seek Him and ultimately be found by Him in His Word.

In hell all that is good about life is gone, gone forever, in the death that is not nonexistence but, rather, eternal separation from God's goodness and any possibility of grace. The Bible describes that separation in most graphic terms. Isaiah speaks of it as an eternal fire that is never quenched; that is, those there are never fully annihilated so that the fire would go out at the end of their suffering (Isaiah 66:24). Jesus tells us that those in hell are in a darkness in which they weep and gnash their teeth; people weep when they are in pain; they gnash their teeth when their pain knows no escape or when in rage and frustration they must realise that they have no one to blame for their inescapable agony but themselves (Matthew 8:12).

Like Isaiah, Jesus tells us that such torment is as eternal as heaven is for the blessed (Matthew 25:41,46; Mark 9:48). Most explicit is the description of hell and its misery in Revelation 14:10-11, where it is described as the experiencing of God's anger unmixed in a torment of fire and brimstone that allows for no rest day or night.

Writers and artists ever since have not been lacking in their depictions of that terror described in God's Word. Dante, for example, in *The Divine Comedy*, imagines that the inscription over the entry to hell reads, "Abandon hope all you who enter here." And in another place he calls hell that place where "there is no hope of hope." How graphic! To have no hope is quite bad enough; to have no hope of hope is hopelessness squared! He has captured well at least a part of hell's essence. Michelangelo and Rembrandt, to mention only two, have likewise graphically depicted in their paintings the seriousness of God in the Last Judgment, both in the exaltation of the saints and in the terror of the damned.

Let no one be deceived with the vain imagination that God is not serious about His Word. Let no one lull himself to sleep with the notion that because God is a loving God, He therefore could never send anyone into hell. Let no one foolishly think that after death impenitent sinners will still have a chance for repentance and entrance into heaven or at the worst will only experience annihilation. That's not what God's Word says, says repeatedly and emphatically. For the God of love is also a God of justice. His justice and His love were both fully satisfied on the cross where Jesus suffered the torments of the damned in our place and for the redemption of all. But those who reject that price so beyond measure and His suffering so horrible reject also its saving benefit. And why should that surprise anyone? So many of the teachings of the Bible require a miracle of the Holy Spirit for us to believe them, not least the heart of the Gospel itself. But this teaching requires no such miracle. That God would not endure His Son's sacrifice so great and His own love so beyond measure to be spurned and treated with contempt should require no

great brilliance to understand! The surprising thing is that the devil is so successful in getting people to think otherwise!