

IGNORING HELL AS AN EVANGELISTIC STRATEGY

Ashby Camp

Copyright © 2024 by Ashby L. Camp. All rights reserved.

If preachers in prior generations hammered too hard on the doctrine of hell in their effort to evangelize, I fear that preachers today are too wary of it. Sensitive to our culture's aversion to judging, they urge Christians not to scare people into the kingdom by warning them about the coming judgment but rather to entice them into the kingdom by explaining that God loves them and wants them to have a better life. As the Christian philosopher Douglas Groothuis noted decades ago, "Many evangelicals are ashamed of [the biblical doctrine of hell], viewing it as a blemish to be covered up by the cosmetic of divine love."¹

I think it is fitting and wise to tell Christians that in sharing the gospel they should emphasize God's love, manifested supremely in the sending of the Son to die on the cross, but we cannot present that amazing act of love in a vacuum. We must explain its purpose and effect for it to be properly appreciated. The fact is that Christ Jesus came into the world to *save* sinners (1 Tim. 1:15; Mat. 1:21). He came to seek and to *save* the lost (Lk. 19:10). He came to *save* the world (Jn. 12:47; Jn. 3:17). It is by belief in him that one is *saved* (Acts 16:31). Those who confess that he is Lord and believe that God raised him from the dead will be *saved*" (Rom. 10:9). The one whose faith in Christ endures to the end will be *saved* (Mat. 10:22, 24:13; Mk. 13:13). Jesus is the only one in whom *salvation* is to be found (Acts 4:12). That is why he is often called "the *Savior*" (e.g., Jn. 4:42; 1 Jn. 4:14) and why the gospel is said to be the power of God for *salvation* (Rom. 1:16) and is called the gospel of our *salvation* (Eph. 1:13).

Since the gospel is about "salvation," the "saving" of sinners, that message will not make sense without some understanding of the peril from which Christ's work offers rescue, the danger that will be avoided by believing the gospel. As John MacArthur states:

Now, "there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Jesus is the Savior – that's been the joyful news from the start.

But you might ask the question: "A Savior to save us from what?" That's certainly a fair question. The word savior implies that we need to be saved from something. Saved is a synonym for rescued or delivered. It implies there's some kind of threatening condition, a dangerous, desperate, or deadly condition from which we need to be rescued. The question is, from what?²

Too often preachers substitute a cultural assessment of the peril for the one given in Scripture. MacArthur observes:

If you listen to the way some preachers speak about the gospel, quite frankly, the condition of unbelief doesn't sound so grave. You get the idea that humanity

¹ Douglas Groothuis, "What About Hell?" *Christian Research Journal* vol. 19, no. 3 (1997) (accessed on 2/27/24).

² John MacArthur, "Saved? From What?" (accessed on 2/28/24).

mainly needs to be rescued from its lack of fulfillment. Maybe your marriage hasn't worked out according to plan; or your child isn't turning out to be tomorrow's Copernicus or Einstein; or your dream career has turned out to be a dead end. You understand. You look at the travel brochures; you really want a month in Europe, but you end up with a three-day trip to see the in-laws. Life just doesn't deliver.

But the Bible makes clear that, whatever ancillary blessings accompany faith in Christ, the salvation available in the gospel is a salvation from the coming wrath of God that will be poured out on the unforgiven at the final judgment. When Jesus returns, he will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty (Rev. 19:15). Jesus said that whoever does not trust in him (does not obey him) will experience the wrath of God that *remains on him*, meaning he will not be saved from that wrath (Jn. 3:36, 3:18). Paul says, "Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be *saved by him from the wrath of God*" (Rom. 5:9). He tells the Thessalonians that Jesus "*delivers us from the wrath to come*" (1 Thess. 1:10). He says that "God has *not destined* us [Christians] *for wrath but to obtain salvation* through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:9). To quote MacArthur again:

The real problem is sin and guilt. That's the issue. God sent Jesus Christ to rescue us from the consequence of our sin, and everybody falls into the category of sinner. It doesn't matter whether you're among the haves or the have-nots, whether you have great expectations or none at all, whether you're consumed by your passions or exhibit a degree of self-control and discipline – you are still a sinner. You have broken the law of God and He's angry about it. Unless something happens to change your condition, you're on your way to eternal hell. You need to be rescued from the consequences of your sin. Those are the principal issues the gospel solves.

As he notes, this judgment wrath from which Christ's work saves us is manifested ultimately in eternal consignment to hell.³ In Mat. 25:31-46 Jesus speaks of the final judgment to take place at his return. All the people of the nations will be separated into two groups: the sheep and the goats. The one group, the sheep on the right, is told in v. 34 that they are blessed by the Father in that they now take their inheritance, the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. The other group, the goats on the left, is told in v. 41 that they are cursed and is then dispatched into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Jesus explains in v. 46, "And these [the unsaved] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

In Rev. 14:9-11 we are told that those who express greater devotion to the beast than to Christ will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb and that the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest, day or night. In Rev. 20:10-15 it is specified (v. 10) that the devil, the beast, and the false prophet will be *tormented* forever and ever in the lake of fire and sulfur. Verse 15 states that the unsaved also are cast into

³ For the claim that hell is an eternal conscious punishment, see Ashby Camp, "[Does Scripture Teach the Annihilation of the Unsaved?](#)" (accessed 2/28/24).

the lake of fire (the fiery lake of burning sulfur – 21:8), indicating they share the same fate as the devil, the beast, and the false prophet.

In 2 Thess. 1:9 Paul is speaking of the final judgment to be meted out at Christ's return, when he "on that day" (v. 10) will be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire (v. 7). He will inflict vengeance on all those who have not responded to God's grace in the gospel of his Son (v. 8).⁴ The nature of the judgment is specified in v. 9: These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

After noting that he is "very conscious of reducing evangelism to some kind of offer of fire insurance for young people," theologian Michael Bird acknowledges:

But something has to be said about the exhortation to "save yourselves from this corrupt generation" (Acts 2:40). If salvation is from judgment, and if the final judgment is meted out in hell, then salvation is from hell – pure and simple. A gospel that does not warn of a final judgment is like telling the citizens of ancient Pompeii that an umbrella made of straw will be sufficient to protect them should Mount Vesuvius erupt.⁵

By not revealing to unbelievers the truth of the coming judgment, one leaves the impression that sin is less egregious than it is, that it does not demand a sentence of hell from an absolutely holy God, and in so doing one diminishes the glory of the Lord's rescue by understating the human predicament. One also deprives the unbeliever of a truth that may legitimately motivate him to give his allegiance to Christ. Who are we to withhold from someone truth that God has revealed about judgment because we think he would be better off not knowing it? If that were the case, one wonders why God revealed it in the first place and revealed it repeatedly and starkly. Do we understand better than God how to appeal to humanity?

The suggestion that it is illegitimate or sub-Christian to be motivated to act by fear of punishment or harm does not withstand scrutiny. If that were true, then Jesus would never have sought to motivate anyone to act by fear of punishment or harm, but he did so repeatedly. Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Lk. 16:19-31 to warn people of the danger of rejecting kingdom ethics (in that instance, the ethic of concern for the needy), which is a rejection of God. Jesus indicated to his hearers that after death they would face irreversible conscious torment if they rejected God's will during their lives.

In Mat. 5:29-30 (see also, Mat. 18:8-9; Mk. 9:43-48) Jesus urged his audience through hyperbolic language to deal radically with sin in their lives because the pain of doing so will be far less than the pain of being cast into hell, which will happen if they coddle their sin. In Mat. 7:13-14 he called his hearers to a kingdom decision by challenging them to enter through the

⁴ The quote is Douglas Moo's apt summary of the clause τοῖς μὴ εἰδόσιν θεὸν καὶ τοῖς μὴ ὑπακούουσιν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ, citing Abraham Malherbe's commentary. Douglas J. Moo, "Paul on Hell" in Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 104.

⁵ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 391.

narrow gate that leads to life rather than through the broad gate that leads to destruction. In Mat. 7:24-27 he encouraged genuine faith that produces obedience by contrasting the fate of one who possesses such faith to that of one who does not; the former will withstand the great storm of judgment, but the latter will not.

Jesus sought to influence his hearers to choose wisely by warning them in the parable of the net in Mat. 13:47-50 that the kingdom of heaven will culminate in the unrighteous being separated from the righteous and thrown into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. In the parable of the faithful servant in Mat. 24:45-51, he urged steadfast faithfulness by contrasting the fate of the faithful with that of the wicked who will be cut to pieces and put with the hypocrites in a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. In the parable of the talents in Mat. 25:14-30, he urged steadfast faithfulness by contrasting the fate of the faithful servants with that of the wicked servant who is cast into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This means of encouraging a right response to God is repeated by inspired writers throughout Scripture. A classic example is Heb. 10:26-31:

²⁶ For if we deliberately keep on sinning after we received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins ²⁷ but a certain, fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸ Anyone who has rejected the law of Moses dies without mercy on [the testimony of] two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much severer punishment do you think the one who trampled on the Son of God and considered a common thing the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and insulted the Spirit of grace will deserve? ³⁰ For we know the one who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "[The] Lord will judge his people." ³¹ [It is] a fearful thing to fall into [the] hands of [the] living God.

When Paul spoke to the men of Athens, he told them that God now commands all people everywhere to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will *judge the world in righteousness* by a man whom he has appointed (Acts 17:30-31). When he spoke to Felix and Drusilla about faith in Christ Jesus, he spoke about righteousness, self-control, and *the coming judgment* (Acts 24:24-25). From these points delivered in a discussion about faith in Christ, one can surmise that he told this pagan governor and his hypocritical Jewish wife that to receive the gracious gift of life offered by God in Christ one must reject all unrighteous conduct and seek to live righteously for his glory. This includes exercising self-control, control over one's sinful desires. On Judgment Day, the only salvation from eternal punishment will be a genuine faith in Jesus, an allegiance to him that includes submission to him as Lord. This is why Felix was alarmed and shut Paul down, telling him he would send for him some other time (Acts 24:25). He was unwilling to repent and was distressed by the message of what awaits those who refuse to do so.

The Book of Revelation is filled with frightening images of judgment designed to encourage faithfulness. To give just one example, Rev. 14:9-12, a text noted above, states:

⁹ And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, ¹⁰ he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. ¹¹ And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." ¹² Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.

For these reasons, I am convinced it is a mistake to exclude the doctrine of hell from our efforts to evangelize or to make only a token mention of it. That does not mean we should make hell a primary focus in teaching the lost. It means that hell should be given its proper place in the story of God's loving work on behalf of rebellious mankind. It is biblical to do so, honors God and his word, and offers the lost the full picture in which to count the cost of becoming a disciple (Lk. 14:28-33).