

Week of January 29-February 4

ETERNAL?

Scripture Reading: Read Matthew chapter 25

One doctrine that unbelievers wrestle with more than any other is the doctrine of eternal punishment. Many an agnostic has raised the issue with me, "How can a good God send anyone to hell?" Others have questioned the very existence of hell and assert that it is the invention of the church to keep people in line and under control. Polling by Gallup reveals that although 90% of Americans believe in God or a universal spirit only 7 in 10 profess belief in the Devil and hell.

Even some believers have wrestled with the idea of eternal punishment. Recently, a mega-church pastor authored a book that challenges the age-old belief in hell and suggests that, in the end, God's love will win out and that most people, if not all, will be saved. In order to avoid the reality of eternal punishment, others have argued that the physical death of the unsaved results in their total destruction (i.e. annihilation) rather than in their everlasting torment. Unbelievers will simply cease to exist.

For those folks who do accept the reality of hell, most don't believe they will end up there anyhow. According to a 1988 Gallup poll, only 6% believed they would end up in hell while 77% rate their chances of getting to heaven very good or excellent.

Despite the reluctance people have to accept the concept of eternal punishment, in our Scripture reading today, no less an authority than Jesus himself affirms its existence. Twice in his teaching on the sheep and the goats, Jesus declares the reality of eternal punishment: "*Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'*" and "*Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.'*"

Notice that Jesus teaches that hell was prepared, not for human beings, but for the devil and his angels. God's intention was never for humanity to suffer eternal torment but to enjoy eternal life. The prophet Ezekiel confirms this when he declares that the Lord does not delight in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23). He is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9). Eternal life is available to anyone who believes in Jesus and that no one has to perish (John 3:16). When sinners reject Jesus and his offer of life, however, they choose eternal separation from God and God honors their choice. Hell, then, is not so much where God sends sinful people so much as it what sinful people choose for themselves. Yet, God continues to woo and love them all the way to the doors of hell itself, calling them to repent and to believe the good news.

We live in a day and age where we hear the word hell mentioned on a daily basis. "What the h...?" "Go to h...!" "H... will freeze over before..." Some have tried to laugh off the horrors of hell to me by proclaiming boldly, "I would rather party in hell with my friends than go to heaven and play a harp and be bored to death." Hell, however, is no laughing matter. It is real and it is forever...Jesus said so!

Action Step: If you do not know Christ, repent today and place your faith in Him.

Prayer Focus: That we would be empowered to share the good news of eternal life

Take-a-way: *Hell is no laughing matter. It's an eternity separated from Christ.*