

[IN GOD'S IMAGE 84 – REVELATION 20 - HELL

Last time we looked at the second resurrection, when that great mass of struggling sinful humanity are raised to life again and stand before Jesus Christ, the righteous Judge on the Day of Judgment.

- ◆ We saw because of God's great love and graciousness towards His creation, how the odds are stacked in favour of them accepting God's invitation to join Him in heaven.
- ◆ Given the circumstances, it's difficult to imagine anyone turning down the invitation to join Him in eternity.
- ◆ However, it seems there are some recalcitrants who are not so enthusiastic to have their names moved from the book of deeds to the book of life.
- ◆ Unlike those involved in the first resurrection, this group is subject to the second death, that is, spiritual death.
- ◆ ***Revelation 20:14-15 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.¹⁵ Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.***

This introduces the subject of hell.

- ◆ Again, this is another of these subjects that has invited all manner of speculation over the centuries.
- ◆ So we should be careful not to read too much into an area in which scripture gives us few details.
- ◆ However we can discern a number of principles from scripture.
- ◆ First, rather than focusing on the temperature of hell, such as fire (Matthew 18:8-9; 25:41), and darkness (Matthew 8:12; 22:13, 25:30) which are mutually exclusive, or of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12), we need to understand these images are not intended to describe the literal characteristics of hell, but rather what it means to be cut off from their God who is their Creator, Father and Savior.
- ◆ It comes back to relationship; heaven is to be in communion with God, hell is to be cut off from God.
- ◆ Second, we should not embrace the sadistic pleasure some of our reformation forebears displayed when talking about the wicked being condemned and thrown into everlasting hell.
- ◆ ***Ezekiel 18:23 Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?***
- ◆ As we have witnessed throughout this series, God is not about the destruction of His enemies, but rather loves them and wills their redemption (Romans 5:10).
- ◆ Third, the Judge they are brought before is none other than Jesus Christ, the one who loves them and gave His life for them.

With that let's look at the subject of hell.

- ◆ I think most of us are familiar with the traditional understanding of hell so we don't need to spend a great deal of time on it.
- ◆ In this view, hell is the place where the wicked will suffer excruciating pain in a lake of fire which shall never be extinguished for all eternity (Luke 16:22-24; Revelation 14:9-11; Revelation 20:10, 14-15).
- ◆ But in recent times, this view has come under increased pressure.
- ◆ The main objection to this view is how this horrific scene reflects on the nature and character of a loving God.
- ◆ If the subject of God allowing evil to exist in the world is a challenging one for Christianity, then the subject of hell, at least when viewed from a traditional standpoint is even more difficult to reconcile with an all-loving God.
- ◆ How do we explain this understanding of God in subjecting these recalcitrants to a miserable existence of conscious eternal suffering?
- ◆ How does this interpretation of hell square with what we read in Revelation 21:3-4?
- ◆ ***Revelation 21:3-4 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."***
- ◆ After millennia of suffering, we have finally reached that victorious period in time when in answer to the Lord's prayer, "Thy kingdom come...thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," has arrived (Matthew 6:9-10).
- ◆ The devil, sin and death have been defeated and thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10).
- ◆ The kingdom of God has arrived in its fullness (Revelation 12:10).
- ◆ God has come to dwell with man in the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 21:1-4).
- ◆ The bride has made herself ready to sit down with her heavenly husband at the great marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9).

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- ◆ “All things” have been made new (Revelation 21:5). Christ has “reconciled to Himself all things in heaven and earth” (Colossians 1:20), and God is “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28).
- ◆ This backdrop raises two important questions.
- ◆ First, are we to believe this God who loves and died for every human being, chooses to preserve the existence of these rebels for no other reason than to subject him or her to perpetual torment?
- ◆ If this were the case, instead of portraying God’s nature as one of love and mercy, rather it would portray it as one of cruelty and vindictiveness.
- ◆ Second, is God going to allow this triumphant heavenly scene just mentioned to be marred for all eternity by the screams and shrieks of those writhing in agony in a far off corner of the cosmos where God is not “all in all”?

In contrast to this traditional view, there is a growing school of thought that rejects this scenario and has come to regard hell as the place of “annihilation.”

- ◆ The “annihilationist” view is that hell will ultimately cease to exist because the wicked thrown there will be destroyed (Matthew 25:46, 2 Thessalonians 1:9).
- ◆ Like the destroyer, Apollyon the devil who went before them into the lake of fire, they will reap what they sow, their ultimate destruction.
- ◆ ***Matthew 25:41 “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.***
- ◆ Notice the original intention of hell is not for humans but for the devil and his angels.
- ◆ It is not God’s intention that any humans end up in this place (1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9).
- ◆ If humans ultimately end up there it is because they have wilfully aligned themselves with the destructive and wicked tendencies of those for whom it was intended.
- ◆ It is not my intention to outline the whole annihilationist argument but here are a few points that make this position quite compelling.
- ◆ 1) The punishment for wilfully rejecting God’s offer of grace is spiritual death.
- ◆ ***Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.***
- ◆ Paul here is in agreement with Revelation 20:14 where those whose names are not found in the book of life are subject to the “second death,” that is, spiritual death.
- ◆ The question, “What is it about death that does not die?” is an appropriate one in these circumstances.
- ◆ 2) The pattern of divine judgment on evil throughout scripture ends with the annihilation of the wicked.
- ◆ At times, God allows evil to run its course before finally stepping in to annihilate the wicked.
- ◆ We have examples of God having to take this drastic action in the case of Noah’s flood, (Genesis 6:5-7, 13) and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:20-21, 19:1-29).
- ◆ Later, the apostle Peter linked these two examples to the fate of the wicked on the Day of Judgment.
- ◆ ***2 Peter 2: 4-6 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment; 5 if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; 6 if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly.***
- ◆ Jesus’ comment in Matthew 10:28 also seems to reinforce this view.
- ◆ ***Matthew 10:28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.***
- ◆ This implies the “personhood,” both body and soul including the consciousness of the wicked will not survive their planned destruction.
- ◆ 3) Eternal life is a promise made only to the righteous, not the wicked (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).
- ◆ Eternal life is a gift God alone can grant and there is no indication in scripture it is given to the wicked, which they would have to have in order to survive indefinitely (John 3:15-16; Romans 6:23; 2 Corinthians 4:14).
- ◆ ***John 5:24 “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.***
- ◆ 4) Our existence whether physical or spiritual depends on the gift of life from the Life-giver.

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- ◆ **Acts 17:27-28** *God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.* ²⁸ *'For in him we live and move and have our being.'*
- ◆ All created beings both in heaven and earth rely on this gift of life for our continued existence.
- ◆ At any time, God can choose to remove this gift and we will cease to exist (Genesis 6:3; Job 1:21; Psalms 37:20,38; Obadiah 16).
- ◆ **1 Corinthians 15:28** *When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.*
- ◆ This goes back to our earlier point where the heavenly host is celebrating the new heavens and the new earth where "all things are made new" and God is "all in all."
- ◆ It's difficult to imagine these wicked beings being included in God's "all in all."

Whether or not we take a more traditional view or an annihilationist view, one thing we can be sure of is, God is not going to allow the wicked to interrupt the heavenly celebrations.

- ◆ So who are these party-poopers who say "no" to God's "yes" and refuse to accept Christ's invitation to join the party?
- ◆ The judgment is about God's gift, an offer of a new life, a new life that longs to break forth out of the corrupt and decaying age of the past into the new life that has broken forth in the resurrected Jesus Christ.
- ◆ It is God's desire to share this new life made possible by Jesus Christ with all of His children.
- ◆ This is, and has been God's purpose behind all that has transpired since creation.
- ◆ The judgment, rather than a time to be feared, is a time to leave behind the old decaying life that leads to death and to accept God's gift of sharing eternal life with Him.
- ◆ Standing before this vast humanity is the righteous Judge and Savior, who in love, took on their cause and substituted Himself as their representative and poured Himself out on the cross for all humanity (Hebrews 12:22-24).
- ◆ **Hebrews 2:9-10** *But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.* ¹⁰ *In bringing many sons and daughters to glory.*
- ◆ God through Christ has shown that he has not withheld His love from anyone, but has given Himself to all, even if they choose to refuse Him.
- ◆ Inconceivable as it may seem in the face of such divine love, to now refuse the gift of grace offered them is to reinstate the judgment of the second death Christ so graciously has suffered for them and subsequently God has no option but to grant them their wish, life apart from God, destruction in hell.
- ◆ In other words, they bring this judgment on themselves. In choosing to oppose God's positive gift to love humanity, it now becomes humanity's judgment when they refuse it.
- ◆ **John 3:18** *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*
- ◆ There is only one way to enter heaven, and that is through Jesus Christ, "the **way** and the **truth** and the **life**" (John 14:6).
- ◆ Hopefully, none will be foolish enough to bring God's judgment on themselves.

However, based on the reception Jesus Christ received at His first coming, there may be a couple of groups who may be reluctant to accept God's gift of grace.

- ◆ Next time we look at the dangerous attitude of those who may be willing to jeopardise their future.