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## “ABANDON HOPE, ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE”<sup>1</sup>

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Let me ask you a question. Are you absolutely certain that one day those who have died in Christ will be resurrected to eternal life in heaven? If you are, then you can be just as sure that unbelievers will be resurrected to eternal torment in hell.

While myriad jokes have surrounded the subject of hell, it is not a laughing matter. There is literally nothing more ghastly and grim than the biblical language used to describe hell. It is variously described as “darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12); as a “fiery furnace” (Matt. 13:42); and as a “lake of burning sulfur” (Rev. 20:10). Its torment is said to be continuous (2 Thess. 1:9), unquenchable (Matt. 3:12), and eternal (Jude 7).

Although many words describing hell are symbolic, they signify an even more suffocating reality. As Dr. R. C. Sproul explains, we find no relief in them: “A breath of relief is usually heard when someone declares, ‘Hell is a symbol for separation from God.’ To be separated from God for eternity is no great threat to the impenitent person. The ungodly want nothing more than to be separated from God. Their problem in Hell will not be separation from God, it will be the presence of God that will torment them. In Hell, God will be present in the fullness of His divine wrath.”<sup>2</sup>

Sproul goes on to say that the most horrifying aspect of hell is its eternity. The most excruciating pain can be endured, if we know that it will end. In hell, no such hope exists. In the words of Dante, “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.”<sup>3</sup>

The horrors of hell are such that they cause us to recoil instinctively in disbelief and doubt. Nevertheless, there are compelling reasons that should erase such doubt from our minds. The first and foremost of such reasons is that Christ, the Creator of the cosmos, clearly communicated hell’s irrevocable reality. “Do not be amazed at this,” He said, “for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:28–29).<sup>4</sup>

**Christ.** As has often been accurately noted, Christ spent more time talking about hell than He did about heaven. In the Sermon on the Mount alone, He explicitly warned His followers about the dangers of hell a half dozen or more times.<sup>5</sup> Using hyperbole, He drove home the urgency of his message: “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell” (Matt. 5:29–30).

Furthermore, in the Olivet Discourse, Christ repeatedly warned His followers of the judgment to come:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left....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."...Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life (Matt. 25:31-33, 41, 46).

Lastly, in His famous story of the rich man and Lazarus, Christ portrayed the finality of eternal torment in hell:

In hell, where [the rich man] was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire." But Abraham replied, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us" (Luke 16:23-26).

**Choice.** As with these compelling words from the lips of Christ, the concept of choice demands that we believe in hell. Without hell there is no choice. Moreover, without choice, heaven would not be heaven but rather hell. The righteous would inherit a counterfeit heaven, and the unrighteous would be incarcerated in heaven against their will, which would be a torture worse than hell. As Dr. Norman Geisler explains, the alternative to hell "would rob human beings of freedom and dignity by forcing them into heaven against their free choice. That would be 'hell' since they do not fit in a place where everything is loving and praising the Person they want most to avoid."<sup>6</sup>

We should note that without eternal separation for the wicked, the very nature of heaven is polluted. "Evil is contagious (1 Cor. 5:6) and must be quarantined. Like a deadly plague, if it is not contained it will continue to contaminate and corrupt. If God did not eventually separate the tares from the wheat, the tares would choke out the wheat. The only way to preserve an eternal place of good is to eternally separate all evil from it. The only way to have an eternal heaven is to have an eternal hell."<sup>7</sup>

It is also crucial to recognize that not all existence in hell is equal. We may safely conclude that the torment of Hitler's hell will greatly exceed the torment experienced by a garden-variety pagan. God is perfectly just, and each person who spurns His grace will suffer exactly what he or she deserves (Luke 12:47-48; Rev. 20:12-13). Those who reject the gospel will be judged more severely than those who never heard it (see Matt. 11:20-24).

**Common Sense.** Like choice, common sense dictates that there must be a hell. Without hell, the wrongs of Hitler's Holocaust will never be righted. Justice will be impugned if, after slaughtering six million Jews, Hitler merely died in the arms of his mistress with no eternal consequences. Common sense told the Psalmist Asaph that for a time it may seem as though the wicked prosper despite their deeds, but in the end justice will be served (Ps. 73).

Furthermore, common sense dictates that a God of love and justice does not arbitrarily rub out the crowning jewels of His creation. As noted by Drs. J. P. Moreland and Gary Habermas, "It would be wrong to destroy something of such value just because it has chosen a life it was not intended to live. Thus, one way God can respect persons is to sustain them in existence and not annihilate them."<sup>8</sup>

Finally, and most importantly, common sense dictates that without a hell there is no need for a Savior. Little needs to be said about the absurdity of suggesting that the Creator should suffer more than the cumulative sufferings of all humanity if there were no hell to save us from. As much as we may wish to think that everyone will be saved, common sense precludes that possibility. C. S. Lewis put it well, "I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully, 'All will be saved.' But my reason retorts, 'without their will, or with it?' If I say 'Without their will' I at once perceive a contradiction; how can the supreme voluntary act of self-surrender be in-voluntary? If I say 'With their will,' my reason replies 'How if they

will not give in?’” (emphasis in original).<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, “there are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done’” (emphasis in original).<sup>10</sup>

– Hank Hanegraaff

## NOTES

1. Adapted from Hank Hanegraaff, *Resurrection* (Nashville: Word, 2000), chapter 7.
2. R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), 286.
3. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto III: 7.
4. This passage teaches the physical resurrection of both believers and unbelievers. The biblical arguments for the continuity and physicality of the believer’s resurrected body apply to the unbeliever as well; thus, even those in hell will have imperishable physical bodies. (See chapter 6 of *Resurrection* for a discussion of the nature of the resurrection body.)
5. See Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; 7:13, 19, 23. To these explicit warnings about hell, Christ added many implicit warnings in His Sermon on the Mount. See Matt. 5:13, 19, 20, 22, 26; 6:15; 7:27. Cf. Matt. 5:18; 6:30.
6. Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), 313.
7. *Ibid.*, 313–14.
8. Gary R. Habermas and J. P. Moreland, *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 296.
9. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 118–19.
10. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Collier Books, 1946), 72, quoted in Geisler, 311.