

That Hideous Doctrine

by John Thomas

That hideous doctrine of hell is fading. How often have you thought of it in the past month, for instance? Does it make a difference in your concern for others, in your witness? Is it a constant and proper burden?

Most believers would have to say no. But the individual isn't the only one to blame. After all, the doctrine no longer gets its float in the church parade; it has become a museum piece at best, stored in the shadows of a far corner.

The reality of hell, however, demands we haul the monstrous thing out again and study it until it changes us. Ugly, garish, and familiar as it is, this doctrine will indeed have a daily, practical, and personal effect on every believer who comes to terms with its force.

Our Lord's words on the subject are unnerving. In Luke 16, He tells us of a rich man who died and went to Hades (the abode of the unsaved dead between death and final judgment). From that story and a few other revelatory facts, we can infer several characteristics of hell.

First, it's a place of great physical pain. The rich man's initial remark concludes with his most pressing concern: "I am in agony in this flame" (Luke 16:24). We do not make enough of this.

We all have experienced pain to some degree. We know it can make a mockery of all life's goals and beauties. Yet we do not seem to know pain as a hint of hell, a searing foretaste of what will befall those who do not know Christ, a grim reminder of what we will be spared from.

God does not leave us with simply the mute fact of hell's physical pain. He tells us how real people will respond to that pain. Our Lord is not being macabre; He is simply telling us the truth.

First, there will be "weeping" (Luke 13:28). Weeping is not something we get a grip on; it is something that grips us.

Recall how you were affected when you last heard someone weep. Remember how you were moved with compassion to want to protect and restore that person? The Lord wants us to know and consider what an upsetting experience it is for the person in hell.

Another response will be "wailing" (Matt. 13:42). While weeping attracts our sympathy, wailing frightens and offends us. It is the pitiable bawl of a soul seeking escape, hurt beyond repair, eternally damaged. A wail is sound gone grotesque because of conclusions we can't live with.

A third response will be "gnashing of teeth" (Luke 13:28). Why? Perhaps because of anger and frustration. It may be a defense against crying out or an intense pause when one is too weary to cry any longer.

Hell has two other aspects, rarely considered, which are both curious and frightening. On earth we take for granted two physical properties that help keep us physically, mentally, and emotionally stable. The first is light; the second is solid, fixed surfaces. Oddly, these two dependables will not accommodate those in hell.

Hell is a place of darkness (Matt. 8:12). Imagine the person who has just entered hell—a neighbor, relative, co-worker, friend. After a roar of physical pain blasts him, he spends his first moments wailing and gnashing his teeth. But after a season, he grows accustomed to the pain, not that it's become tolerable, but that his capacity for it has enlarged to comprehend it, yet not be consumed by it. Though he hurts, he is now able to think, and he instinctively looks about him. But as he looks he sees only blackness.

In his past life he learned that if he looked long enough, a glow of light somewhere would yield definition to his surroundings. So he blinks and strains to focus his eyes, but his efforts yield only blackness. He turns and strains his eyes in another direction. He waits. He sees nothing but unyielding black ink. It clings to him, smothering and oppressing him.

Realizing that the darkness is not going to give way, he nervously begins to feel for something solid to get his bearings. He reaches for walls or rocks or trees or chairs; he stretches his legs to feel the ground and touches nothing.

Hell is a "bottomless pit" (Rev. 20:1,2 KJV); however, the new occupant is slow to learn. In growing panic, he kicks his feet and waves his arms. He stretches and he lunges. But he finds nothing. After more feverish tries, he pauses from exhaustion, suspended in black. Suddenly, with a scream he kicks, twists, and lunges until he is again too exhausted to move.

He hangs there, alone with his pain. Unable to touch a solid object or see a solitary thing, he begins to weep.

His sobs choke through the darkness. They become weak, then lost in hell's roar.

As time passes, he begins to do what the rich man did—he again starts to think. His first thoughts are of hope. You see, he still thinks as he did on earth, where he kept himself alive with hope. When things got bad, he always found a way out. If he felt pain, he took medicine. If he were hungry, he ate food. If he lost love, there was more love to be found.

So he casts about in his mind for a plan to apply to the hope building in his chest.

Of course, he thinks, Jesus, the God of love, can get me out of this.

He cries out with a surge, "Jesus! Jesus! You were right! Help me! Get me out of this!"

He waits, breathing hard with desperation. The sound of his voice slips into the darkness and is lost.

He tries again. "I believe, Jesus! I believe now! Save me from this!" Again the darkness smothers his words.

Our sinner is not unique. Everyone in hell believes.

When he wearies of appeals, he does next what anyone would do—assesses his situation and attempts to adapt. But then it hits him—*this is forever*.

Jesus made it very clear. He used the same words for "forever" to describe both heaven and hell.

Forever, he thinks, and his mind labors through the blackness until he aches.

"Forever!" he whispers in wonder. The idea deepens, widens, and towers over him.

The awful truth spreads before him like endless, overlapping slats: *When I put in ten thousand centuries of time here, I will not have accomplished one thing. I will not have one second less to spend here.*

As the rich man pleaded for one drop of water, so, too, our new occupant entertains a similar ambition. In life he learned that even bad things could be tolerated if one could find temporary relief. Perhaps even hell, if one could rest from time to time, would be more tolerable.

He learns, though, that "the smoke of (his) torment goes up forever and ever; and (he has) no rest day and night" (Rev. 14:11 NASB).

No rest day and night—think of that.

Thoughts of this happening to people we know, people like us, are too terrifying to entertain for long. The idea of allowing someone to endure such torture for eternity violates the sensibilities of even the most severe judge among us. We simply cannot bear it.

But our thoughts of hell will never be as unmanageable as its reality. We must take this doctrine of hell, therefore, and make sure we are practically affected by it.

A hard look at this doctrine should first change our view of sin. Most believers do not take sin as seriously as God does. We need to realize that in God's eyes and in His actual plan, each deserves eternal punishment in hell.

We can actually learn, by comparison, to hate sin as God hates it. As the reality of hell violates and offends us, for example, so sin violates and offends God. As we cannot bear to look upon the horrors of hell, so God cannot bear to look upon the horrors of sin. As hell revolts us to the point of hatred for it, so also God finds sin revolting. The comparison is not perfect, but it offers a start.

Second, the truth of hell should encourage our witness. Can we ever hear a sigh of weariness, see a moment of doubt, or feel pain without being reminded of that place? In all honesty, can we see any unbeliever, watch his petty human activities, realize what he has in store, and not be moved with compassion? It encourages us to witness in word and deed.

That hideous doctrine may grip our souls in dark terror and make us weep, but let us be sure it also prompts us to holiness and compassion.