

Reading the Bible Through Jesus's Eyes, pt.2

We Need to Talk About Hell

1. There are certain objections to belief in a loving God. A few of them are heard again and again. The problem of pain, substitutionary atonement, and this, hell. We need to talk about hell.
2. Honest people can read the Bible and then fall into three broad categories: infernalists, annihilationists, or universalists. By the way, each of these three categories have numerous subdivisions. For example, universalists don't believe that all people are just swooped into heaven at death, no harm done. No, they believe in different forms of remedial punishment that is designed to cleanse the sinner who is either then given eternal life or offered it. Several variations on that theme.
3. One of the earliest memories I have is that of me struggling with the concept of eternal, never ending, trillions of years of horrendous torture for all of those who were evil...and those who never heard the name of God. It seemed terribly unjust and made the Gospel something other than good news. I didn't want it to be true.
4. I understood that the hell bound group were sinners. They were made up by smokers, drinkers, dancers, atheists, card players, and Hitler. But then we were assured that anyone who was not in our particular branch of our particular religious tribe were also going to that same pit of torture and ruin.
5. It wasn't until I was in my middle to late 30's that I found an alternative story that made sense when I read the Bible through that story's eyes. It came from a book by a Church of Christ elder named Edward Fudge and was titled "The Fire That Consumes." To have a fellow CoC member – and elder, nonetheless – tell me that our traditional teaching was not correct was a wonderful relief.
6. His book is not an easy road because he is so careful, so studious, and so determined to footnote and backtrack every point that you might need to back up and read parts of it three or four times for it to

sink in. It was worth the effort to read it then and it is worth that same effort today.

7. Then I came across a survey of Bible translations and texts by Gary Amirault. He wrote an article entitled “Hell Is Leaving the Bible ‘Forever.’” He tracks how scholarship is changing the way we use the word “hell” and even its appearance in the text. The KJV uses the word 54x while the NKJV uses it only 32x. The American Standard Version of 1901 (the favored text of our church) uses it a mere 13x, all in the NT. The NIV uses it 14x. Once you leave these versions the word “hell” disappears. Pick up a study tome such as Zondervan’s Parallel NT in Greek and English or the NASB-NIV Parallel in Greek and English and you do not find the word “hell” even once.
8. The closer we get to understanding the way Greek and Hebrew convey meaning, the fewer times “hell” shows up. That should make us step back a bit.
9. That is not the only word that is disappearing fast. Another word is “forever.” Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, known as the Prince of Expositors, wrote this: “Let me say to Bible students that we must be very careful how to use the word ‘eternity.’ We have fallen into great error in our constant use of that word. There is NO word in the whole Book of God corresponding with our “eternal”, which as commonly used among us, means absolutely without end.”
10. We often rush to apply the words “eternal” and “forever” or “without end” when we describe the torments of hell...but is that fair? More to the point, is that accurate? Once we know to look for it, we find that it is easy to show that the Bible doesn’t use these words in the same way we do.
11. Sodom’s fiery judgment is eternal (Jude 7) – until – God “will restore the fortunes of Sodom” (Ezekiel 16:53-55) And, yes, Jude knew Ezekiel’s work. There is only a contradiction here if you ignore how they used “eternal.”
12. Ammon is to become a wasteland “forever” and “rise no more” (Zephaniah 2:9; Jeremiah 25:27) --- until --- the Lord will “restore the fortunes of the Ammonites.” (Jeremiah 49:6) Last week, we

mentioned how the Moabites could not enter the temple “forever” until the tenth generation. (comparative word: tall man, tall tree, tall building – the “tall” depends on the thing being measured)

13. Habbakuk tells us of mountains that were “everlasting” --- until -- they were shattered in Habbakuk 3:6.
14. The Aaronic priesthood was to be an everlasting priesthood until it was replaced by the Melchizedek priesthood in Hebrews 7.
15. The Law of Moses was an “everlasting covenant” (Leviticus 24:8) yet the NT tells us that the first “was done away” and “abolished” (2 Cor. 3:11-13) as God “made the first old” (Hebrews 8:13).
16. There are dozens more examples. Our word “eternal” just isn’t the right word to be used in most of these places.
17. Remember that Jesus himself said that punishment differs. We mentioned Luke 12:47,48 last week when we quoted Jesus as saying that some bad servants deserved few stripes while others deserved many. Punishment isn’t a “one size fits all” affair.
18. So...is hell eternal? If you mean by “hell” a fiery lake...I would say, “yes, but it is still a metaphor.” I would then add, “while it might be eternal, those who are lost aren’t.” Whether they are destroyed or whether they are purified, I do not see evidence in scripture that God’s plan is for them to exist forever in flames and falling and darkness.
19. In short, the word “eternal” has always meant in scripture, “until God’s purpose is fulfilled.” Surely, scripture uses a far more elastic definition of “forever” and “eternal” than we use. But wait.....!
20. The Bible says “forever in hell” and then “forever in heaven” so we will stay as long in heaven as evil people do in hell, right? No. Remember, when the word is used as “until God’ purpose is fulfilled,” it changes everything. Those being punished will be punished until God’s purpose is fulfilled...and God is not willing that any should perish.

21. And in heaven? I think the will of God is plainly given in scripture. Jesus came into the world to save the world, not to condemn it. We will stay with God until he wants us elsewhere (rulers over many?). A God of love will not kick us out for overstaying our welcome.
22. The Bible – and some old gospel songs and spirituals – talk about 12 gates to the city. Do you believe in a literal gate? Do you think God imported pearls (oyster waste byproducts) and gold into heaven? Was God being descriptive or was God using symbols that we could understand?
23. When I read John's descriptions of all the precious gems and stones used in heaven's construction, I do not think that God used atoms and molecules, recreating Earth's geology to make our new home. I think He's trying to tell us that it is beautiful – and beyond beautiful. He wants us to change our lives so we will get there. Once there, it seems that there is more for us to do and that we will be thrilled to do it.
24. So...what exactly happens to those being punished? And for how long? We will talk more about that next week but, for now, remember that we serve a God of love and we are made in His image. That is why I am not at all convinced that anyone listening to this lesson or reading the notes believes in an eternal torture pit for all who are not true followers of Jesus. If you truly believed that, you would run from house to house, tearing your clothes with tears in your eyes, begging people to follow Jesus.
25. And you would have to explain through your sobs that our God is a God of love and Jesus is the Prince of Peace and that their righteousness would never be able to accept or design an unjust punishment. How would you do that?
26. Next week, we look at the scriptures and the questions raised when we speak of a limited time of punishment. Let's leave this subject today with a reminder that everything is limited except the goodness of God. If you believe that, it changes everything.