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Revelation #27

Must We Speak of Hell? Revelation 14:6-13

Let me say this up front and get it out of the way. I really don't want to preach on this text. It isn't because I don't understand it. I do. In fact, it is precisely *because* I understand what it is saying that makes me reluctant to preach on it. Neither is my reluctance to preach on it because I don't believe it is true. I *do* believe it is true. I do believe that there is a place called hell and that people are going there.

My hesitation or reluctance is due to what I have seen repeatedly through the years whenever this text or others like it speak so definitively and inescapably about the reality of hell. What I've observed is that some are immediately offended to such a degree that they simply walk away from the Christian faith. I have a close friend whose son has abandoned Christianity because he cannot bring himself to believe that God would consign anyone to hell. This topic is also emotionally explosive. It's hard to read words like those in vv. 9-11 and maintain one's composure. People hear these verses and they grimace and flinch and recoil and sometimes shut their ears so that they don't have to think about what is being said.

And then there are those whose reaction is one of distortion or denial. They perform every manner of exegetical gymnastics to jump over or around or in some way evade the implications of what is said. Others shake their heads in dismay and deny that whatever I may say this text means it simply cannot mean. It must mean something else. Why? Because it is too emotionally disturbing to contemplate the fact that people we know and love will be among those who are "tormented with fire and sulfur" and who "have no rest, day or night" from the suffering that is here described.

So, you may be asking yourself: "Sam, how do *you* get past your gut reaction to a text like this? How do you bring yourself to embrace it as true and how do you get the consent of your own soul to preach on it?" That's a good question. There are three short answers to it.

First, I have such unshakable and robust confidence in the inerrant truth of every word in this book, the Bible, that the matter is already settled before I even read the text. I believe, as the Apostle Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:16, that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and [is] profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

Second, by God's grace I have come to understand the immeasurable magnitude and majesty of God's holiness and beauty and authority and the honor that is due to him from all of his creatures, including you and me.

Third, by God's grace I have come to understand the immeasurable horror and ugliness and self-centeredness of humanity's sin and depravity and wickedness.

So I can honestly say that *to the degree that you and I struggle with the concept of hell and eternal punishment is the degree to which we don't understand God's holiness and honor, on the one hand, or the horror and depravity of mankind's sin, on the other*. In other words, if hell strikes you as unreasonable or unfair or disproportionate, it can only be due to the fact that either you don't believe this book is inspired and true, or you don't believe that God is infinitely holy and just, or you don't believe that mankind is morally depraved and has committed cosmic treason and is thus deserving of eternal condemnation.

Myths about hell

Perhaps it would help if I took just a couple of minutes and mentioned some of the myths in our culture about the nature and reality of hell.

Myth #1 - Hell is a place where we are united with our unbelieving friends and drink beer all the time in an endless party. The fact is that hell is a place of utter isolation, loneliness, and deprivation.

Myth #2 - Hell is the place where Satan and his demons exercise their authority to rule and reign. The fact is that hell is the place where Satan and his demons suffer eternal punishment. Satan and his demons are inmates in hell, not its warden or guards.

Myth #3 – Directly related to the previous myth, there is the notion among many that in hell Satan and his demons torment human beings who also are there. No. There is not one text in the Bible that suggests Satan and his demons afflict or torment human beings. They themselves, instead, are the object of God's punishment.

Myth #4 - There are people in hell crying out for mercy who want to reconcile with God. Nothing in Scripture indicates this is so. Instead, those in hell are eternally defiant of God and hate him all the more with each passing moment.

Myth #5 - There are people in hell who don't deserve to be there. Nothing could be farther from the truth. God's justice is impeccable and he never consigns anyone to punishment in hell who does not fully deserve to suffer there.

Myth #6 - There are people in hell who wanted to go to heaven while they were still alive, but God wouldn't let them. That is utterly false. Jesus himself made this clear when he said, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. . . . whoever comes to me I will never cast out For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:35, 37b, 40).

Myth #7 - There are people in hell who will eventually be released and granted entrance into heaven. As much as we might wish this were true, it isn't. The Bible does not teach the doctrine of universalism, that is, the idea that everyone will eventually be saved and given eternal life in the new heaven and new earth.

Myth #8 - In hell people will finally be rid of God and have no experience of him. That is not true. It is true they will have no experience of God's loving and gracious presence, but they will most assuredly experience his presence in justice and wrath. In fact, we read here in Revelation 14:10 that they will be tormented "in the presence of the Lamb," that is, the presence of Jesus Christ. As John Piper has said, v. 14 is not saying that "those in hell have the privilege of seeing what they enjoy, but that they have the remorse of seeing what they rejected."

Just a few more introductory comments are in order. There simply is no way around the truth of God's wrath against sin. There are, in fact, more than 600 references to God's wrath in Scripture. And when it is described there is no hesitation or embarrassment or the nervous shuffling of feet that we so often witness today. Furthermore, as someone has said, "In the Bible, God's wrath is not the problem but the solution . . . [It is] not the offensive doctrine needing defense but the long-awaited vindication of justice after" the suffering endured by God's people at the hands of the followers of the Beast.

Context

Insofar as the majority of chapters 12-13 focused on the persecution of believers by the Dragon (Satan) and his earthly agents, the sea-beast and the land-beast, it is understandable that chapter 14, together with 15:2-4, should describe the reward of the persecuted faithful and the final punishment of their enemies. In other words, "chapter 14 briefly answers two pressing questions: What becomes of those who refuse to receive the mark of the beast and are killed (vv. 1-5)? [And] What happens to the beast and his servants (vv. 6-20)?" (Johnson, 141).

When we were in chapter 7 of Revelation I addressed the identity of the 144,000 and at that time also explained Revelation 14:1-5. So if you were not present and you are curious about the 144,000, I encourage you to return to that sermon and the notes I provided. Today, though, we pick up the narrative in Revelation 14:6-13.

The Eternal Gospel of God (vv. 6-7)

Is the "gospel" preached by this angel designed to lead to conversion? Or is it simply the declaration of final judgment on those who have rejected it? Those who favor the latter point to what follows: vv. 8-11 proceed to describe the eternal judgment of unbelievers. They also point to the similarity between this angel and his gospel, on the one hand, and the messenger of the three woes in 8:13. Both speak "with a loud voice" (8:13; 14:7) while "flying in mid-heaven" (8:13; 14:6). Both also address unbelieving earth-dwellers (8:13; 14:6). Thus, many

conclude that the command to “fear” God, “give him glory,” and “worship” is a *compulsory edict* for hostile humanity, signifying that they will be *compelled* to acknowledge the reality of who God is in Jesus (cf. Phil. 2:9-11). But that doesn’t mean they are saved.

On the other hand, these verses sound similar to Revelation 11:13 where we earlier concluded that the possibility of conversion is in view. However, even if the angel is holding out one final opportunity to repent and be saved, the subsequent context would seem to indicate it goes unheeded.

This “gospel” is referred to as “eternal” because it is the fulfillment of God’s saving purposes for mankind from the foundation of the world, but also because the consequences of either believing it or rejecting it are eternal (heaven or hell).

The Fall of Babylon (v. 8)

The repetition of the verb “fallen” is probably intended for emphasis, to highlight the certainty of Babylon’s judgment. ***But who or what is “Babylon”?***

In its original concrete historical manifestation, Babylon was a city, then an empire under which Israel lived in captivity (see Gen. 10:1-11:9; Isa. 13-14; Jer. 50-51; Zech. 5:5-11). Jeremiah spoke of ancient Babylon in graphic terms: “Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine; therefore the nations went mad” (Jer. 51:7).

Just as ancient Babylon destroyed the temple and oppressed God’s people, so also Rome destroyed the temple in Jerusalem (70 a.d.) and even now oppresses the people. ***Thus, in Revelation, all wicked world systems, including Rome, were called by the symbolic name “Babylon the Great”. Babylon is the symbol of human civilization with all its pomp and circumstance organized in opposition to God. It is the sum total of pagan culture: social, intellectual, commercial, political, and religious.*** It is the essence of evil, the “Mecca”, if you will, of heathenism, the symbol for collective rebellion against God in any and every form. It is the universal or world system of unbelief, idolatry, and apostasy that opposes and persecutes the people of God.

Although the word translated “sexual immorality” is the Greek term *porneia*, in view of what we read in Revelation 18 the particular kind of immorality in v. 8 may well be commercial in nature (see 18:3,9; cf. Isa. 23:15-18). “Babylon’s promise of prosperous earthly welfare for its willing subjects is an intoxication that the majority of the world’s inhabitants also want to imbibe” (Beale, 756).

Eternal Punishment and the Nature of Hell (vv. 9-11)

This third angel also announces judgment. The verbs translated “worships” and “receives” are both in the present tense, perhaps pointing to a continual, obstinate and thus final allegiance to the beast, in spite of the warnings issued in vv. 6-8. Several things should be noted.

First, those who choose to “drink the wine of the passion of her [Babylon’s] sexual immorality” (v. 8) will, appropriately, be forced to “drink the wine of God’s wrath” (v. 10; i.e., *the wine which is his wrath*). The image of pouring intoxicating wine from a cup often points to the experience of divine wrath and the suffering it inevitably brings (see Pss. 60:3; 75:8; Isa. 51:17,21-23; 63:6; Jer. 25:15-18; 51:17; Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 23:31-33; Hab. 2:16; Zech. 12:2).

The intoxicating effect of drinking Babylon’s wine is only temporary; it will wear off. But the effect of drinking the wine of God’s wrath is eternal. The phrase “poured full strength” in v. 10 is literally, **“mixed unmixed.”** There are two options here. (1) It may mean that, contrary to normal practice, the wine that is prepared (“mixed”) will not in any way be diluted with water (hence, “unmixed”). That is, God’s wrath is utterly undiluted, being poured out in full strength, unmitigated, unmixed with mercy or longsuffering.

(2) Or John may be alluding to Psalm 75:8 where wine is mixed with spices to increase its intensity (cf. Jer. 31:2). Thus “mixed” would refer to the **addition** of spices to increase the potency of the wine and “unmixed” to the fact that it is not diluted with water. On either reading, God’s wrath is penal and in no way remedial. Longsuffering and patience have given way to the consummation of a promised day of reckoning.

Second, they will be “tormented with fire and sulfur” (v. 10b). Punishment with “fire and sulfur” is also found in Genesis 19:24 (Sodom and Gomorrah); Psalm 11:6; Isa. 30:33; Job 18:15. The combination of fire and sulfur (or brimstone) as a means of torment occurs 4x in Revelation (14:10; 19:20; 20:10; 21:8). Sulfur or brimstone was a type of asphalt found in volcanic deposits that produced extreme heat and a noxious smell. However, the nature of the “torment” is primarily spiritual and psychological (cf. Rev. 9:5-6; 18:7,10,15; 20:10), and thus the “fire and sulfur” are probably figurative. In other words, as literal fire and sulfur cause physical pain and extreme discomfort to the body, so the infliction of divine judgment on unbelievers will cause spiritual or psychological anguish to their souls. But could there also be a “physical” dimension to eternal punishment (see esp. John 5:28-29)?

Third, public exposure is an added insult to the torment of the wicked, for we read that their punishment is in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. Cf. Rev. 19:1-10. One can’t help but wonder: What will the angels and Jesus be thinking and feeling, at that time?

The Duration of Hell

That is the nature of hell. But the question of its duration is where we enter into controversy.

First, the “smoke” of their torment, i.e., the smoke of the fire and sulfur (v. 10) “goes up forever and ever” (v. 11; see Isa. 34:9-10). It is almost as if there is a smoldering testimony to the consequences of sin and the justice of God’s wrath. The duration of this phenomenon is said to be “forever and ever” or, more literally, “unto the ages of the ages”. This terminology occurs 13x in Revelation: 3x with reference to the duration of praise, glory, and dominion given to God (1:6; 5:13; 7:12); 5x with reference to the length of the life of God or Christ (1:18; 4:9,10; 10:6; 15:7); once referring to the length of God’s reign in Christ (11:15); once referring to the length of the saints’ reign (22:5); once referring to the ascension of the smoke of destroyed Babylon (19:3); once referring to the duration of torment of the devil, beast, and false prophet (20:10); and, of course, once here in 14:11.

Second, “they have no rest, day or night” (the latter phrase being parallel to “forever and ever”). In Revelation 4:8 the same terminology occurs with regard to the duration of worship on the part of the four living creatures. That from which they have “no rest” is, presumably, the torment caused by the fire and brimstone.

But, do texts such as this speak of eternal ***punishing*** (with focus on the ***act*** of judging) or eternal ***punishment*** (with focus on the ***effect*** of judgment)? In other words, what is it that is eternal or unending: the ***act*** of punishing unbelievers, or the ***effect*** of their punishment? Again, is the torment of the lost a ***conscious experience*** that never ends? Or is the punishment a form of ***annihilation*** in which, after a just season of suffering in perfect proportion to sins committed, the soul ceases to exist?

Does the ascending smoke of their torment point to the unending conscious ***experience*** of suffering they endure? Or does it signify a lasting, irreversible ***effect*** of their punishment in which they are annihilated? Those who argue for the latter view contend that there will be no rest “day or night” from torment while it continues or as long as it lasts. But whether or not it lasts forever or eternally must be determined on other grounds.

Annihilation or Eternal Conscious Suffering?

Do not confuse annihilationism with universalism. Universalists believe that after unbelievers have suffered they will be saved and reconciled to God in heaven. According to the doctrine known as ***annihilationism***, once unbelievers have suffered in hell in proportion to their sin, they will be annihilated as the final act of judgment. That is to say, God will simply cause them to cease to be.

(1) Those who argue for annihilation appeal to the biblical language of hell, primarily the words “to destroy”, “destruction”, and “perish” (see Phil. 3:19; 1 Thess. 5:3; 2 Thess. 1:9; 2 Peter 3:7). The “fire” of hell burns up, consumes, and utterly “destroys” its object, leaving nothing (see Matt. 10:28). Thus, they interpret “destroy” to mean deprive of life and existence, hence the extinction of being.

However, the word group which includes “destroy” and its synonyms is used in a variety of ways, some of which do not require or even imply the cessation of existence. In other words, a careful examination of usage indicates that *destruction can occur without extinction of being*. Likewise, with the imagery of “fire” in hell, we must acknowledge that this is *metaphor*, and thus not press the terms to prove something about hell’s duration they were never intended to communicate. Just think of hell in the NT being described at one time as “utter darkness” and at another time as “a lake of fire”. How do these two coexist if they are strictly literal? Thus, we must be cautious in drawing rigid doctrinal conclusions about the supposed “function” of fire in hell. One cannot help but wonder about Matt. 18:8 which speaks of those who are thrown into the “eternal” fire. As Carson says, “one is surely entitled to ask why the fires should burn forever and the worms not die [cf. Mark 9:47-48] if their purpose comes to an end” (525).

(2) Those who argue for annihilation appeal to the Greek word often translated “forever” (*aion*), which literally means “age”. Whereas in some contexts the “age” may be endless, in others it may not be so. But there are as many texts where *aion* means eternal as there are where it refers to a more limited period of time. This argument is indecisive on both sides of the debate.

(3) Those who argue for annihilation appeal to an argument from justice: A “just” penalty will be in proportion to the crime or sin committed. How can sins committed in time by a finite creature warrant eternal, unending torment?

In response I must say that we humans are hardly the ones to assess the enormity of our sins. “Is the magnitude of our sin established by our own status, or by the degree of offense against the sovereign, transcendent God” (Carson, 534)? Says Piper: “The essential thing is that degrees of blameworthiness come not from how long you offend dignity, but from how high the dignity is that you offend” (*Let the Nations Be Glad!* 127). In other words, our sin is deserving of infinite punishment because of the infinite glory of the One against whom it is perpetrated.

(4) To suggest that hell lasts forever is to say that God does not, in actual fact, achieve victory over sin and evil. How can God be said to “win” if his enemy continues to exist forever? Would not the eternally continuous existence of hell and its occupants mar the beauty and joy of heaven?

My answer is No, I don’t think so. Only sin that goes *unpunished* would indicate a failure of justice and a defeat of God’s purpose. The ongoing existence of hell and its occupants would just as readily reflect on the glory of God’s holiness and his righteous opposition to evil.

(5) Those who argue for annihilation find it morally repugnant and emotionally abhorrent to suggest that a God of love and mercy and kindness would torment people in hell forever and ever. No matter how grievous the sin(s), horrific pain, whether spiritual or physical or both, that goes on and on for billions of years, and after that for billions of years, *ad infinitum*, is more than they can tolerate. John Stott puts it this way:

“I find the concept [of eternal conscious punishment in hell] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterising their feelings or cracking under the strain. But our emotions are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth and must not be exalted to the place of supreme authority in determining it. As a committed Evangelical, my question must be – and is – not what does my heart tell me, but what does God’s word say?” (*Essentials*, 314-15).

I feel the force of this point, but there are other considerations as well. Perhaps the idea of endless punishing is less offensive when the idea of *endless sinning* is considered. In other words, if those in hell never cease to sin, why should they ever cease to suffer?

Consider Revelation 22:11. There we read: “Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.” On this latter text Carson comments: “If the holy and those who do right continue to be holy and to do right, *in anticipation of the perfect holiness and rightness to be lived and practiced throughout all eternity*, should we not also conclude that the vile continue in their vileness *in anticipation of the vileness they will live and practice throughout all eternity* (533)?”

The point here is that although we don’t have a strong biblical basis for asserting that those consigned to hell will continue to sin, neither do we have any indication that they won’t. And it seems reasonable to think that with the withdrawal of God’s common grace and restraint on their sin they will sin ever more and more throughout eternity. It makes sense, then, that they will suffer throughout eternity.

If one should reject this notion and argue that people pay fully for their sins in hell and at some point *cease* to sin, why can’t they then be brought into heaven (thereby turning hell into purgatory)? If their sins have *not* been fully paid for in hell, on what grounds does justice permit them to be annihilated?

In addition, one must explain Matt. 25:46 and Rev. 20:10-15. Regardless of what one thinks about the identity of the beast and false prophet, no evangelical denies that Satan is a *sentient or feeling* being. Thus, here is at least one such “person” who clearly suffers eternal conscious torment. “We may not feel as much sympathy for him as for fellow human beings, and we may cheerfully insist that he is more evil than any human being, but even so, it is hard to see how the arguments deployed against the notion of eternal conscious suffering of sinful human beings would be any less cogent against the devil” (Carson, 527). See especially 20:15 (“if *anyone’s* name”, not just the beast and false prophet) and 21:8.

I must confess that I wish the doctrine of annihilation were true. But at this time in my life and my study of God’s Word, I don’t believe it is. But I’m open to being persuaded otherwise!

The Endurance of the Saints (vv. 12-13)

These verses provide a motivation to believers to persevere, whether by pointing to the reality of judgment (v. 12) or to the promise of reward of eternal rest (v. 13).

Could it be that vv. 6-11 and the description of hell are intended to *motivate believers to persevere*? In other words, one of the ways believers are stirred to persevere in faith and obedience is by contemplating the eternal destiny of those who choose instead to worship the beast.

To “die in the Lord” means to die physically yet spiritually united to Christ by faith. All those Christians we have known and loved who have died are freed from the burden of painful striving and the struggle of resisting sin and the agony of brokenness of life on this earth. It is reassuring to know that their “deeds follow them” rather than precede them. Our deeds do not pave the way into heavenly rest, as if they are the grounds for our acceptance with God. Instead they “follow” us in the sense that they bear witness to our faith in Christ, deeds for which rewards will be granted in the new heaven and new earth (see 2 Cor. 5:10).

Conclusion

I have two heartfelt and altogether sincere reactions to this passage and others like it. On the one hand, I can’t read it or think about it without feeling a deep and unrelenting agony in my heart. We should never talk about hell without weeping, for it is real and people are going there. This is not a subject for joking or lighthearted banter. It is an issue that should provoke within us both anguish and an urgent commitment to share the gospel with those who remain in unbelief.

My second reaction is one of unfathomable gratitude. When I read about hell in a passage like Revelation 14 I’m reading about *what I deserve*. God would have been perfectly just and righteous had he chosen to consign me to eternal torment. But in mercy he has drawn me to faith in his Son. In mercy he has poured out his wrath on Jesus in my place, a wrath and judgment that Jesus lovingly and willingly embraced and endured. Every single one of us deserves damnation. God owes us nothing but justice. The fact that he has given us mercy instead, and forgiveness instead of condemnation, ought to awaken in us the most heartfelt and passionate gratitude and praise.