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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 15.8 – The Doctrine of the Last Things (Eschatology)

Eternal Damnation

Before His ascension to heaven, Jesus told His disciples: “**Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned**” (Mark 16:15-16). In this lesson we will study how the Bible describes what it means to be condemned.

Most of what we learn about this condemnation comes from the mouth of Jesus Himself from the four Gospels. In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus called it “**hell fire**” (Matthew 5:22) and “**hell**” (Matthew 5:29-30) and “**the furnace of fire**” (Matthew 13:42). He said, for example: “**If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell**” (Matthew 5:30). In Matthew 18:8 it is called “**the everlasting fire**”.

According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus added that hell is “**the fire that shall never be quenched**” and quoted the words of the prophet Isaiah: “**Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched**” (Mark 9:43-48). John the Baptist had said that the Messiah “**will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire**” (Matthew 3:12). In His explanation of the parable of the dragnet, Jesus said at “**the end of the age**” “**the angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire**” (Matthew 13:49-50).

Jesus declared that His enemies, the scribes and Pharisees, together with their proselytes, were sons of “**hell**” (Matthew 23:15). In the same lengthy diatribe against them, He said: “**Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?**” (Matthew 23:33). Obviously, hell is not a desirable place.

In Jesus’ parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus, the rich man after his death is said to be “**in torments in Hades**” (Luke 16:23). In Hades the rich man cried out: “**I am tormented in this flame**” (Luke 16:24). He called Hades “**this place of torment**” (Luke 16:28). And there was no relief and no way out. The beggar Lazarus could not help him. In the parable Abraham explained: “**Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us**” (Luke 16:26).

Jesus said: “**Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell**” (Matthew 10:28). Notice that hell is not only a place of punishment for the body but for the soul as well, in other words, for the whole person, body and soul.

Several times in His teaching Jesus spoke of hell as “**outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth**” (Matthew 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). Being in outer darkness means missing the celebration inside, where the lights are on, and everyone is having a good time. The weeping means hell is a place of sorrow and sadness; the gnashing of teeth indicates that it will be a place of anger and pain.

In His description of the day of judgment Jesus spoke of “**the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels**”. The human beings who are sent there are indeed “**cursed**” (Matthew 25:41). “**These will go away into everlasting punishment**” (Matthew 25:46).

Jesus' apostles agreed with their Master in their depictions of hell. The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: "**It is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you. ... These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power**" (2 Thessalonians 1:6, 9). The apostle Peter calls these enemies of the Lord "**accursed children**" (2 Peter 2:14) and says that there is reserved for them "**the blackness of darkness forever**" (2 Peter 2:17).

The letter to the Hebrews speaks of "**eternal judgment**" (Hebrews 6:2). In the book of Revelation, the apostle John calls it "**the second death**" (Revelation 2:11; 20:6), which is the same as "**the lake which burns with fire and brimstone**" (Revelation 21:8).

In view of all these words from Jesus and His apostles we must conclude that hell is not a joke but a terrible reality. It is a sober fact that those who do not trust in Christ as their Savior from sin will suffer eternal damnation in hell. Eternal damnation is as real as eternal life. It is because of man's consciousness of God (his conscience) that everyone, deep down in their heart, recognizes that they will have to face their Maker, and that is why the letter to the Hebrews says that human beings are "**through fear of death ... all their lifetime subject to bondage**" (Hebrews 2:15). They are afraid of death because of the possibility of punishment awaiting them after their death.

In an effort to persuade themselves that there is no such place as hell and that there is no such thing as punishment after death, many have argued that a God who loves the world (John 3:16) could not possibly inflict something so terrible as eternal punishment on anyone. Universalists teach that God will eventually take everyone to heaven, and no one will suffer eternally. Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists deny the existence of an eternal hell. In fact, it seems that today most people in America, whether they call themselves Christians or not, do not consider hell as anything to be concerned about. The few people who believe that there is a hell do not believe they will be going there. If there is a hell, they think it will be only for the really evil people, certainly not for themselves. Others who calling themselves Christians have argued that when unbelievers die, they simply cease to exist; they do not have to endure any kind of punishment. Their only punishment is that they will not enjoy heaven.

The Roman Catholic Church and many others teach that there are other ways to escape hell besides trusting in Jesus as their Savior. They teach that if people live a fairly good life according to the knowledge they have, they will escape punishment and will be rewarded with eternal life. Even the Swiss theologian Ulrich Zwingli, a contemporary of Martin Luther, taught that heathen heroes such as Socrates, Cato, and Scipio would be in heaven based on their good lives. But Martin Luther strongly disagreed with him, saying: "What need is there of baptism, the sacrament, Christ, the Gospel, or the prophets and holy Scripture if such godless heathen ... are saved ..., even though they knew nothing about God, Scripture, the Gospel, Christ, baptism, the sacrament, or the Christian faith?" (*Luther's Works*, Volume 38, p. 290). Clearly Zwingli was wrong, for Jesus said: "**He who does not believe will be condemned**" (Mark 16:16).

God's love for sinners is not in doubt. God sent Jesus to die for all sins. The Holy Spirit wants the Good News of Jesus to go everywhere in the world. But it is possible for man to reject God's love, and in that case, there is punishment. The author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote: "**Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. And again, 'The LORD will judge His people.' It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God**" (Hebrews 10:28-31). "**'There is no peace,' says the LORD, 'for the wicked'**" (Isaiah 48:22; 57:21).

God addresses those on His left hand with words such as these: “**You are those who forsake the LORD. ... When I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not hear, but did evil before My eyes, and chose that in which I do not delight.**’ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Behold, My servants shall eat, but you shall be hungry; behold, My servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty; behold, My servants shall rejoice, but you shall be ashamed; behold, My servants shall sing for joy of heart, but you shall cry for sorrow of heart, and wail for grief of spirit” (Isaiah 65:11-14).

Damnation is essentially being separated from all of God’s blessings and everything that is good. Jesus will say to those who are not His sheep: “**Depart from Me**” (Matthew 7:23). He will say: “**Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels**” (Matthew 25:41). “**Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out**” (Luke 13:27-28). All will rise from the dead on the Last Day, but the resurrection of the unbelievers will be “**the resurrection of condemnation**” (John 5:29). This condemnation will include “**indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish**” (Romans 2:8-9), as well as “**destruction and perdition**” (1 Timothy 6:9). Those who reject Christ experience “**a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries**” (Hebrews 10:27).

Jesus’ words on several occasions indicate that for some it will be worse in hell than for others. When Jesus sent out His twelve apostles on their preaching tour, He said concerning those cities that rejected their teaching: “**It will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!**” (Matthew 10:15). Jesus said to the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida: “**It will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you**” (Matthew 11:22). To Capernaum, His home town during His ministry, He said: “**It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you**” (Matthew 11:24).

Jesus will make a distinction of some kind between those who sinned against their knowledge and those who did not have that knowledge. He explained it like this: “**That servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more**” (Luke 12:47-48).

Perhaps the most frightening thing about eternal death is that it is eternal. Eternity is a concept that we cannot fully comprehend. But the Scriptures clearly describe hell in such a way as to make the point that there is no hope for a change of any kind. The Holy Spirit spoke through the prophet Isaiah: “**It is the day of the LORD’s vengeance Its streams shall be turned into pitch, and its dust into brimstone; its land shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night or day; its smoke shall ascend forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; no one shall pass through it forever and ever**” (Isaiah 34:8-10).

In His parables and illustrations Jesus indicated the hopelessness of God’s punishment in words such as these: “**You will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny**” (Matthew 5:26). “**You shall not depart from there till you have paid the very last mite**” (Luke 12:59). “**It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire**” (Matthew 18:8). “**It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched – where ‘their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched’**” (Mark 9:45-46). Jesus spoke of the “**great gulf**” between heaven and hell, “**so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us**” (Luke 16:26). Those on Jesus’ left hand on that last day of judgment will hear these words from the Judge: “**Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels**” (Matthew 25:41). “**And these will go away into everlasting punishment**” (Matthew 25:46).

Jesus' apostles did not tone down Jesus' threats in any way. The apostle Paul taught: "**These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day**" (2 Thessalonians 1:9-10). Peter spoke of "**the spirits in prison**" (1 Peter 3:19). Jude, the Lord's brother, referred to Sodom and Gomorrah as being "**set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire**" (Jude 7).

The book of Revelation describes eternal death in a vivid manner. "**The smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night**" (Revelation 14:11). "**Her smoke rises up forever and ever**" (Revelation 19:3). "**They will be tormented day and night forever and ever**" (Revelation 20:10).

As Jesus said, hell was not prepared for human beings at all, but "**for the devil and his angels**" (Matthew 25:41). Why, then, will there be human beings in hell? It is not because God did not love them. "**God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son**" (John 3:16). It is not because Jesus did not atone for their sins. "**The Man Christ Jesus ... gave Himself a ransom for all**" (1 Timothy 2:6). There is no lack of desire on the part of the Holy Spirit to bring all persons to believe in Jesus. "**God ... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth**" (1 Timothy 2:3-4). Nor is there any deficiency in the means of grace God has chosen to use to bring sinners to faith in Christ. "**If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead**" (Luke 16:31). James said: "**The implanted word ... is able to save your souls**" (James 1:21). Certainly there is no eternal decree on the part of God to condemn a certain portion of the human race, as was taught by John Calvin in the days of Martin Luther, and as is still taught by those who follow Calvin's "reasonable" logic. Such a blasphemous teaching is simply not to be found anywhere in Holy Scripture.

The only reason for the presence of human beings in hell is the rejection on the part of individual human beings of God's Gospel truth. Since the unbeliever rejects the only Savior God has provided and sent, he or she is damned both on account of his or her sins and on account of his or her unbelief. There are many Scripture passages that pin the blame for eternal punishment on only one human being: the individual who is thus condemned. The prophet Isaiah declared: "**Woe to their soul! For they have brought evil upon themselves**" (Isaiah 3:9). The prophet Jeremiah spoke likewise: "**Have you not brought this on yourself in that you have forsaken the LORD your God when He led you in the way?**" (Jeremiah 2:17).

Jesus told Nicodemus: "**God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil**" (John 3:17-19). John the Baptist taught the very same thing: "**He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him**" (John 3:36).

The Pharisees heard this explanation from Jesus' lips: "**If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains**" (John 9:41). The problem of the Pharisees was that they did not want to admit their own helplessness to save themselves; they saw no need for a Savior. Consequently, they rejected the one Savior God sent to save them. Human pride and self-righteousness work together in the unbeliever to close his mind and heart to his only hope for salvation: Jesus Christ.

By rejecting Christ's forgiveness, the unbeliever faces God with his own record of sins of thought, word, and deed. Jesus said: "**If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins**" (John 8:24). And so it will be. The apostle Paul said: "**Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things** (namely, your sins of thought, word, and deed as spelled out in the context of this letter) **the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience**" (Ephesians 5:6).

No matter what kind of excuses unbelievers bring to explain and defend their unbelief and to blame God for their failure to believe, there are no excuses that are acceptable to God. It is written: “**Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify God, nor were thankful**” (Romans 1:20-21). God’s creation and preservation are available to all, “**so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him**” (Acts 17:27).

It is certainly an act of love on our part as Christians to teach the truth about sin and unbelief and hell. The doctrine of eternal death is revealed by a loving God to us as a warning, so that we might escape the consequences of sin and unbelief through Jesus Christ. It is not we who teach the truth about hell who are lacking in love and mercy, but it is those theologians and Bible teachers who fail to teach what God’s Word says about hell that are the ones lacking in love and mercy. It is Jesus Himself, who in love gave Himself on the cross to rescue us from hell, who has warned about hell more than any other. Most of what we know about hell has come directly from Jesus’ own loving lips.

We need to remember the words of the prophet Ezekiel: “**If the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman’s hand. ... When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you shall surely die!’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul**” (Ezekiel 33:6-9).

Where is hell located? We think of heaven as being above and hell as being beneath. But it is not to be expected that anyone from earth will ever be able to find either heaven or hell by space exploration or by digging down deep in the earth. All that is necessary for us to know is that heaven and hell are realities, and that after this world comes to an end, we shall be residing, body and soul, in either heaven or hell. Jesus distinguished between heaven and hell by speaking of those on the inside, sitting down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and those on the outside, “**cast out into outer darkness**” (Matthew 8:11-12). In Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man says that he is in “**this place of torment**” (Luke 16:28).

When Jesus’ disciples were waiting for the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the apostle Peter said of Judas Iscariot that he went “**to his own place**” (Acts 1:25). That place was hell. The apostle Paul spoke “**of those under the earth**” (Philippians 2:10), no doubt referring to the devil and his army of evil angels (demons). The apostle Peter said of those who died in the flood that they were “**spirits in prison**” (1 Peter 3:19). Lastly, Jesus revealed to John in the book of Revelation that impenitent unbelievers will forever be on the outside, rather than being on the inside with God and His saints, who have the right to the tree of life in the New Jerusalem. Jesus said: “**Outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie**” (Revelation 22:14-15). By “dogs” Jesus no doubt means false teachers, as in Philippians 3:2.

The Old Testament Hebrew word that is sometimes translated as “hell” in English translations is the word *Sheol* (שְׁאֹל). Some translations use various English words to translate this word. Some prefer to simply retain the Hebrew expression and leave the term *Sheol* untranslated. A word study of *Sheol* shows that the word is sometimes used to refer to punishment, to death, or simply to the grave. The context in which the word is used usually makes the meaning clear.

The New Testament Greek word that corresponds to *Sheol* is the word *Hades* (ἄδης). This word also may mean death or the grave, as well as hell. Another word that is used for hell in the New Testament is the word *Gehenna* (γέεννα). In Acts 2:27 the Greek word *Hades* is used as a translation of the Hebrew word *Sheol* in Psalm 16. In Psalm 16:10 we read: “**You will not leave My soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.**” In Acts 2:27 we read: “**You will not leave My soul in Hades,**

nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.” David wrote this psalm as a prophecy of His Son, the Messiah, the Son of David. In this context *Sheol* and *Hades* refer to the grave, and the term “soul” does not refer to the soul of Jesus as distinct from His body, but simply refers to the person of Jesus. Jesus died and was buried. He went to His grave, His tomb. But He was not left there to rot, as would happen to others. In fact, God did not permit David’s Son, His own Son, even to begin to see any corruption, and on the third day He rose again from the dead, as is indicated by the next verse: **“You have made known to Me the way of life; You will make Me full of joy in Your presence”** (Acts 2:28).

Through Christ’s death and resurrection and through the work of the Holy Spirit in causing us to trust in Christ, we have the only way that is possible to escape the awful fate of eternal death. Now is the time of grace for all sinners to listen to Moses and the prophets, as well as Jesus and His apostles, and hang on to their words of life before the day of judgment comes and our time of grace will have come to an end. There are two ways in which our time of grace comes to an end: the day of our physical death or the day when Christ returns, whichever day comes first for us. Obviously, we need to be ready for that day.

Questions

1. What are the two possible eternal destinies for human beings?
2. What are some of the ways in which hell is described in the Bible?
3. What is meant by the second death?
4. List several false teachings with respect to hell and the groups that teach them.
5. Whose fault is it that some people go to hell?
6. Why can we say that hell was not prepared for any human beings?
7. Why is it an act of love on our part to warn people about the reality of hell?
8. Who has revealed to us the most details about hell?
9. Name some Hebrew and Greek words that are sometimes translated as “hell”.
10. How did Jesus win for us an escape from the hell we deserve?
11. What is the Holy Spirit’s desire for all human beings?
12. How does the Holy Spirit carry out this desire?