

Hell, It's not that bad. . . or is it?

Revelation 14 & Matthew 26

By
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This last weekend I was browsing through a bookstore, which is one of the things I enjoy doing, when I noticed that there were two entire book stands of books on the Titanic. No doubt James Cameron's epic movie is behind much of the interest in the tragedy. It struck me as I was looking at some of the pictures and reading some of the stories that the story of the Titanic in many ways resembles the voyage of human history.

There they were, like many of us now, enjoying the wonders of life – celebrating, dancing, laughing and living in luxury. In the back of their minds there was no hint of fear, no glimmer of thought that the ship would sink. They knew she was unsinkable. They sailed along silently in the dark sea without so much as a care. No one suspected that she was on a collision course of death with a piece of floating ice - that within moments the ship would be slipping silently toward the dark and icy floor of the Atlantic. What people thought was an impossibility at one moment became a stark and terrifying reality the next. For she met her destiny when she collided with the iceberg.

There's another movie coming out this next summer about a collision, only this time it's with an asteroid the size of Texas. What's even more interesting is that it has caused some speculation among various astronomers who say that there is such a possibility. The movie, of course, centers around the collision of planet earth with this apocalyptic asteroid which, like the Titanic would result in tremendous tragedy for mankind.

Humanity, like the Titanic and some recent speculations about planet earth's date with an asteroid, is headed for a most certain collision. Yet this collision with something infinitely more terrifying, more powerful, and more devastating than a piece of ice or a asteroid the size of Texas. The collision is not a matter of speculation or a question of if, it's a matter of certainty and question of when. Mankind, like those on the Titanic will be floating along eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, when will collide with her Maker, Creator and Judge. And the results will be disastrous. While they are saying, "Peace and safety" then destruction will come upon them suddenly and they will not escape. At this collision the darkness and rebellion of humanity will come into contact with the consuming light of God's Holy and Awesome presence.

What will the result be? For the Titanic, the final result was a ship lying at the bottom of the Atlantic. For Humanity, the result has been variously labeled: Jesus called it fiery Hell; and the apostle John called it the Lake which burns with fire and brimstone.

Hell is the place where God's infinite holy wrath will be poured out on all those who oppose him and reject his son. It will be the final execution point of God's awesome justice. It will be the final resting place of Humanity.

You might say at this point, "this sure is a negative message! Why not speak on something more positive and uplifting? Why speak on something so horrifying? First of all the topic of Hell and judgment fill the pages of Scripture. The Bible doesn't shy away from talking about the horror of judgment. Secondly, we cannot fully appreciate the fullness of God's love unless we understand the fullness of his Holiness. We cannot fully appreciate the glory of the good news of Jesus until we understand the terror of the bad news of Hell. We cannot fully appreciate the magnitude of God's Hope unless we

understand the magnitude of God's judgment. We cannot fully appreciate the event of the cross unless we understand its connection with Hell.

This morning we are going to be looking at a portion of Scripture which describes the outcome of this collision between the creature, Man, and his Creator, God. The portion of Scripture we will be looking at is found in Revelation chapter 14 verses 9-12. This message will proceed in the following manner: first, the Bad News; second, the good news; and finally its application.

THE BAD NEWS

The Text before us answers three questions regarding God's wrath as it pertains to Hell – who, what and how long.

A. Who will receive this terrifying wrath? Beginning in verse 9 the text reads, "A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: 'if anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he too will drink of the wine of God's fury. . . .'" This wrath is further described in the following verses as the lake of fire.

This third angel follows two others: the first angel found in verses 6-9 makes one final plea to those on the earth to repent and give glory to God before he pours out his final wrath; the second angel announces the destruction of the evil world empire which opposes God, called Babylon the Great. This third angel then brings a message of God's final judgment.

Who is it that receives this wrath? The angel says it is all those who worship the beast and take his mark. To be sure this reference to the beast and to his mark is a future reality yet unseen in human history. The beast refers to one final world ruler who opposes God and causes everyone to wear his name. Like a rancher brands his cows to show that they belong to him, so this mark is intended to show who belongs to the kingdom of this world ruler and his system. This is spoken of in greater detail at the end of chapter 13 which we will have to explore at another time. Other writers in the New Testament call him the Anti Christ.

You say, "AH. . . only those in this future Satanic kingdom will collide with God's awesome wrath!" Wrong. If you turn over to Revelation chapter 20:11-15 you'll read that everyone whose name is not written in the book of life experience this wrath of the lake of fire. The text reads, "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from His presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. . . . V. 13 The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and earth and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. . . . V. 15, If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

This includes everyone. You see, everyone who rejects Christ in reality serves the other side. There is no middle ground. Everyone bar none will experience this great wrath of God. People from every time of history, from every part of the world will

experience this judgment – Cain who murdered Able, Pharaoh, Nimrod, Judas and the billions of others who have lived on this planet from the first day until the last. No one will be missing at this collision between Mankind and God. There will be no place to hide and no place to run. Thus, while this particular text focuses on a future reality, it includes with it all who have lived. Everyone will be involved.

So, who will receive this wrath? Everyone apart from those who find refuge in Christ. This is indeed bad news.

The text address a second question

B. How severe will God's wrath be? Continuing in verse 10 John writes, “. . . he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb.” Here a powerful image is put forward for us to consider – an image which permeates the Old Testament. For the prophets spoke often of the Cup of God's wrath. For instance, the Prophet Isaiah says, “. . . rise up O Jerusalem you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath. . . . (Isa. 51:17).” Here God takes the fury in its full strength and pours it into the cup of his wrath. In the time of Jesus, people would often add water to the wine to dilute it so as not to become intoxicated. Its potency was watered down enabling one to drink more wine. Here in this picture, the wine of God's fury is not watered down. It is not diluted. He pours it full strength into the cup of his wrath.

This means that such manifestations of God's wrath in the Old Testament like the flood, or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah were watered down versions of God's wrath – mere introductions to the final and full wrath of the Almighty.

This cup of undiluted wrath is further described by the apostle as torment in burning sulfur or the lake of fire. I'm told that death by burning is among the most cruel and painful. Unlike drowning or freezing to death in which there is a momentary struggle and then unconsciousness, when someone is burned they are actually kept alive by the pain for much of the experience until the body finally dies.

In hell, however, the bodies of those suffering torment will never die. They will be built to feel the full severity of the pain, yet not be consumed. The pain will be unbearable, and yet their bodies will bear it. Their bodies will not grow numb or tolerant of the pain but feel full at all times the fullness of the suffering.

Jesus described the experience like this, he said, “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age.. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of this kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. You'll note that he says they will gnash or grind their teeth because of the pain.

The description of torment by fire is a reality. Yet this fire is not simply to be thought of as a geographical feature of Hell. The fire of Hell is the fire of God's wrath. We heard it said that Hell is separation from God. This description needs some

modification. After all, isn't God omnipresent? Isn't he everywhere? David comments in Psalm 139:7-8 "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold you are there."

People will experience God in Hell – but not his gracious, merciful and compassionate side. They will experience the terrifying side of God which vehemently reacts to sin and rebellion in wrath and judgment. The terrifying reality of Hell will not be the viscous violence of the Demons devouring poor unsuspecting souls. The terrifying reality of Hell is God's awesome wrath. There will be no more grace, no more mercy and no more love – only wrath. There will be no friendships in Hell and no common comfort among those inhabiting its locale.

How severe is God's wrath? Worse than you can possibly imagine.

The text addresses yet a third question about Hell and God's wrath.

C. How Long Will It Last? The text goes on to answer this question in verse 11, "And the smoke of their torment rises **for ever and ever** [pretty clear]. There is no rest day or night. . . ."

One of the things that makes pain tolerable in this life is the hope that it will end. Occasionally I get these excruciatingly painful migraine headaches which leave me lying on my bed whimpering like a baby. I've experienced a lot of painful things, but none of them quite meet the pain I feel when I get these migraines. It feels like someone is driving a stake through my head. My one thought when I'm experiencing this pain is "It has to come to an end, it has to come to an end." I can't imagine having to live life with a sustained migraine headache. I'd rather die! Yet in Hell there will be no end. There will be no light at the end of the tunnel. People will not be able to say to themselves "It has to come to end, it has to come to an end" there will be no hope of relief – only utter despair. Perhaps this is why Jesus describes Hell as a place of weeping and crying out. Because in the severity of the pain there will be no relief.

The text also makes clear not only that it will be eternal in length, but that the pain will be eternally sustained. There will be no rest day or night. When I first arrived here some months ago, John and Sharon invited me and some others over for dinner. The table was beautifully decorated with a dozen or so little short candles to give a festive ambiance. While we were eating, I asked John to pass me the Hot Salsa. Little did I know, however, that the spoon in the salsa dish was sitting about an inch over the flames of one of the candles. So, John passed the salsa and I reached out and grabbed the spoon. It must have been near glowing red, because it left a brand mark of the print of the spoon on my thumb. It was painful when I grabbed it, and it was painful after I let go. What did I do to relieve the pain? I was given an ice cube which brought relief. There will be no relief from God's wrath. There will be no rest, only sustained severity of pain forever and ever!!!

Jonathan Edwards gives this illustration to make the point,

Imagine yourself to be cast into a fiery oven, or of a great furnace, where your pain would be as much greater than that occasioned by accidentally touching a coal of fire, as the heat is greater. Imagine also that your body were to lie there for a quarter of an hour, all the while full of quick sense; what horror would you feel at the entrance of such a furnace! And how long would that quarter of an hour seem to you! And after you had endured it for one minute, how overbearing would it be to you to think that you had it to endure the other fourteen. But what would be the effect on your soul, if you knew you must lie there enduring that torment to the full for twenty-four hours! And how much greater would be the effect, if you knew you must endure it for a whole year; and how vastly greater still, if you know you must endure it for a thousand years! O then, how would you heart sink, if you thought, if you knew, that you must bear it forever and ever! That there would be no end! That after millions of millions of ages, your torment would be no nearer to an end, than ever it was; and that you never, never should be delivered.

Oh the despair of those who enter into such an endless torment.

At this point someone might raise an objection that this seems unfair. How can God be just and righteous in subjecting finite creatures to an infinite duration of torment? It seems to me that this objection fails to recognize the heinous nature of sin and the infinite majesty and glory of God. Sin is above all else an offense and an act of rebellion against an infinitely glorious creator. This means that the debt of justice owed to God for the offense is also infinite. How can one repay or make restitution when the offense is infinite. It can't be repaid, at least not by us. Thus, the just demand for sin is eternal judgment.

What a collision that will be. It will result in judgment on everyone who does not have refuge in Christ, the judgment will be severe beyond imagination, and it will be eternal in duration. This is the bad news.

BUT, you know what? This Cup of God's undiluted wrath has been poured out before! This brings us to the splendor of the Good News. Turn in your bibles to Matthew 26:38-39.

THE GOOD NEWS

Jesus having brought his disciples to the Garden on the night before his crucifixion and said to them in verse 38, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me. Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.'"

Jesus knew full well that he too was on a collision course with the awesome undiluted wrath of his Father. This CUP that he prayed about is none other than the CUP of God's wrath against sin. No wonder Jesus said to his disciples that he was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death! He was contemplating the wrath of God

that he would experience not for his sins (for he was perfect) but for the sins of the entire world.

The physical pain and humiliation that Jesus experienced in the flogging, beating, the crown of thorns and the horror of crucifixion was not what overwhelmed Jesus. That was child's play. After all didn't Jesus say, "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." No Jesus wasn't overwhelmed by the thought of physical torture, as bad as it was. He was overwhelmed what the Father would do to him. He was overwhelmed by the thought of experiencing the full weight of God's wrath poured out on him for all the sins of history. It was as if God balled up the fullness of hell, wrath and torment, and in a short time poured it all out on his son. And you know what? Jesus volunteered to do it. He freely gave himself to the wrath of God that our sins might be paid for. And you know what else, "It was the fathers desire to give his son." The bad news showed us the seriousness of God's holiness. The good news of Jesus' cross shows us how far God's love and grace has come. Such love and grace is unfathomable! We can echo with Charles Wesley in the words of his praise "Amazing love how can it be that thou my God shouldst die for me." You see, God's great love in Jesus provided the satisfaction for his holy demand for justice. God's justice was circumvented in the cross of Jesus, it was satisfied, for the full weight of Hell was cast upon him. Thus, in the cross of Jesus we see both the horror of God's holy wrath, and the splendor of his infinite love.

Perhaps against the backdrop of the Bad News we can begin to understand the unsearchable depths of the Good news of Easter and the Cross.

Finally we come to the last part of the message. How should we respond?

APPLICATION

To The Unbeliever -

There are those here who are honest enough to acknowledge that you don't truly believe in Christ. You may come to church because your husband or wife comes. Or you come because your kids come and you want them to have some kind of moral influence. Yet you don't believe. You aren't a follower of Christ.

The application for you is self-evident. Without Jesus you will collide with the Creator's wrath. You may deny it exists, but that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. People denied the fact that the Titanic could sink or even was sinking, but that didn't prevent the ultimate reality from taking place.

Remember the man who was warned time and time again that Mt. Saint Helen's was going to explode? Yet he didn't believe. His disbelief didn't stop the mountain from exploding in fire on March 18th 1980.

Neither will your disbelief in Hell and God's wrath prevent it from happening. God speaks of his coming wrath unequivocally in his word, and you can bet that if he said it will happen. And you could face it at any time. Your mortality hangs by a thread. At any moment our lives may be snuffed out without warning. Just a couple of weeks

ago a pastor friend of mine who I went to school with was driving down the road thinking naturally about things he was experiencing, things he needed to do when he was hit by a drunk driver out of nowhere and killed instantly. Your mortality hangs by a thread.

Am I trying to scare you? No I'm praying that God's truth will scare you! The truth of God's wrath against sin is scary. There's no way around it. The Bible is filled with speech about Hell and wrath. These are not the words of Dan Deckard, or John Hanson or Chuck Correia. These are the infallible words of Scripture. But I'm also trying to show you that there is a way to Salvation – through his Son who willingly took your punishment. God has provided a bright hope – he opens his arms of mercy and love to you now.

To you Jesus says in John 5:24 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life. Turn away from your own prideful way and embrace him in faith!

To The Pretender -

There are others here that are Pretenders. Jesus tells us that in his church there are tares among the wheat. That is, there are those who may think their Christians and look like Christians but aren't saved. You play the game well, you play at looking like a Christian and may believe in the existence of God and Christ but you don't possess saving faith.

Yet your faith is hollow, not true. And on that final day Jesus will say to you "depart from me you workers of iniquity I never knew you." This is a time to examine your life and see if in fact your faith is authentic or if it's mere acting. True faith is characterized by more than affirmation of a specific truth. It includes commitment, devotion, love, obedience, and perseverance. That doesn't mean we'll be perfect in this life, but that a measure of obedience must be present if true faith is present. If upon examination you find that you are playing at Christianity. I would ask you to cry out to God to save you.

To The Believer -

The application for the believer is in the text of Revelation itself in verse 12. This teaching on Hell should exhort us to sheer ourselves off from the things of this world - to persevere in obedience and faith in Jesus – to make no compromise with the sinful enticements of this culture.

Further it should reaffirm to us that Christianity is about eternal realities. That we must be about the business of proclaiming both the bad news of judgement and the good news of the Cross of Christ.

May God be merciful and gracious and bless his word in our lives.