

FUTUREWORLD pt.11 4-6-14

“Eternal Destinies”

His name was Quasimodo. Do you know the man to whom I refer? He was the title character in Victor Hugo's classic work, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. His job was to ring the bells at the famed Cathedral in Paris. Well, after Quasimodo's death, the bishop of the Cathedral of Notre Dame sent word through the streets of Paris that a new bell ringer was needed. The bishop decided that he would conduct the interviews personally and went up into the belfry to begin the screening process. After observing several applicants demonstrate their skills, he had decided to call it a day. Just then, an armless man approached him and announced that he was there to apply for the bell ringer's job. The bishop was incredulous. "You have no arms!" "No matter," said the man. "Observe!" And he began striking the bells with his face, producing a beautiful melody. The bishop listened in astonishment; convinced he had found a replacement for Quasimodo. But suddenly, rushing forward to strike the bell again, the armless man tripped and plunged headlong out of the belfry window to his death in the street below. The stunned bishop rushed to his side. When he reached the street, a crowd had gathered around the fallen figure, drawn by the beautiful music they had heard only moments before. As they silently parted to let the bishop through, one of them asked, "Bishop, who was this man?" "I don't know his name," the bishop sadly replied, "but his face sure does ring a bell." Wait! Wait! There's more. The following day, despite the sadness that weighed heavily on his heart due to the unfortunate death of the armless man, the bishop continued his interviews for the bell ringer of Notre Dame. The first man to approach him said, "Your Excellency, I am the brother of the poor armless wretch that fell to his death from this very belfry yesterday. I pray that you honor his life by allowing me to replace him in this duty." The bishop agreed to give the man an audition, and, as the armless man's brother stooped to pick up a heavy mallet to strike the first bell, he groaned, clutched at his chest, twirled around, and died on the spot. Two monks, hearing the bishop's cries of grief at this second tragedy, rushed up the stairs to his side. "What has happened? Who is this man?" the first monk asked breathlessly. "I don't know his name," the bishop sadly replied, "But he's a dead ringer for his brother."

I'll stop there. I figure another one of those and there might be nobody left in here. Similarly, I figured I had better stop my teaching on the millennial and end times issue because I know a good number of you were growing weary with those difficult and confusing subjects. I don't want you to abandon us in search of clearer preaching. So, I am going to get off the millennial issue and move on to an easier subject, a subject that will not be so hard or so divisive. So, I am. I continue with the series on the future but instead of looking at the millennium we will spend a few weeks on the doctrine of eternal punishment. That, I figured would bring back the crowds. In reality, we will look at heaven and hell, or, to be more accurate, we will look at the subject of personal eschatology. It was Bill Gates who gave us the personal computer, Billy Graham gave us the personal Savior; now Dan Hendley offers you a personal eschatology. Eschatology is the study or doctrine of last things. Personal eschatology will look not so much at where history is going but where individuals are headed. We will talk about what will happen to you and to me, to the Christian, to the pagan, to the ignorant native in Africa.

Today and the next several weeks I'm on something that pre-mils, post-mils, a-mils and pan-mils all agree on. The final estate of all men will be eternal in duration. What that eternity will be like is the subject of our meditations. I intend to move us backwards thru history, taking us on a journey from our eternal condition backwards thru time and all the steps or choices that lead us into our eternal home. Job.14:**14a** *If a man dies, will he live again?* That is a question thinking people have asked from the beginning of our race. Is there anything after death? What is it? What is our ultimate destiny as human beings? Not surprisingly, there are different answers offered, but not that many. The first question to ask and answer is whether or not humans have any conscious existence after physical death at all? I mean, apart from your rotting corpse, will there be any you anymore at all? There are two profound answers offered to that question. Yes, and no. Those who say "no" we can label with the high-sounding term "annihilationists." Annihilationists believe that death is it - that the self is annihilated when the body stops functioning and the person ceases to exist. Annihilationists are usually, but not always, atheistic in outlook. Some may regard them as pessimistic. Obviously, nobody can get very excited about a move into nothingness, but the annihilationists prefer to see themselves as realistic. After all they will ask, "what evidence is there that life goes on beyond death?" And

when they ask that question they do have a point. Our planet is full of people who talk about being reunited with dear Aunt Susie up in heaven, but what basis do they really have for such a hope as that? An overwhelming majority of people in this world reject the annihilation theory, but on what grounds? Why do they believe in a life after death? Is it because Jesus rose from the dead? Is it because the Bible teaches such? No, not at all. Most people believe in a continued existence because they want to believe it. It is based on sheer sentimentalism and I, for one, wouldn't give you ten cents for that kind of hope. But the fact is that we humans are likely to find some reason to believe in ongoing life because the alternative view is so very, very dreadful. And I do mean *dreadful* with a capital *D*. The annihilationist doctrine is the foundation of utter despair and those who seek to really believe it and live like it's so are the prophets of meaninglessness. Bertrand Russell once wrote, "*There is darkness without and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendor, no vastness anywhere; only triviality for a moment, and then nothing.*" You give serious thought to that for even five minutes and I guarantee you that you will not be able to tolerate it. Everything within me screams out at such a proposition and says, "*No, it cannot be. I was not made in order to live a few years and sink into oblivion.*" When I look into the eyes of my wife, or my children and feel the incredible bond that I share with them, the love that God has put in my heart for them; when I worship or when I preach with the winds of God's Spirit carrying me along I can no more deny eternal life than I can deny my own existence. My soul revolts against the idea of annihilation. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has placed eternity in our hearts, and I believe that means we have a longing for eternity. We are, and we know we are, made to live forever. That's why the idea of temporary existence is so utterly repugnant to us. We are made to live forever. And no matter how much atheism you pump into us, or how much evolutionism, or how much materialistic bias most people will never buy into annihilationism because it opposes what we are. Woody Allen has a quaint way of putting some of these things. He once wrote about the different concepts people have of immortality. Some believe in the immortality found in leaving offspring behind. Some believe in the immortality of the deeds or the writings, or the works of art that live on after you. Woody Allen says, "*I don't want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve immortality through not dying. I don't want to live on in the*

*hearts of my countrymen; I want to live on in my apartment.*" Nothing else. Nothing else can satisfy. I am not referring to Woody's apartment but to the reality of eternal life.

So, is a belief in life beyond the grave just pure sentimentality? I believe it is more than that. When I observe life as we know it I find that where there is a hunger within man there is an answer to that hunger in the world. There is food for my hunger, water for my thirst, sleep for my weariness, and I have reason then to expect that something would answer to my need for immortality. No less a thinker than Immanuel Kant of the 18th century, philosophy's greatest skeptic, has concluded that there must be an eternity. In Kant's work, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, he argues that for life to be meaningful there must be an ultimate justice. And to have ultimate justice you have to have a judgment, and a Judge and a life after death to even out the score. If, when you die, you are done, then there is no justice is there? We certainly don't see it in this life. If this life is it then I throw up my hands and I lay aside all my silly principles and I go for the gusto because why bother with anything but my own immediate pleasure. That is where annihilationism leads you. Now look with me at I Corinthians 15. In this chapter we have the response of the apostle Paul to the annihilationist position. It's funny and sad to me, that so many "with it", intellectually sophisticated modern ivory tower types believe that they are part of the new, bold generation - the first to lay aside superstition and face the hard realities of no god and no eternity. Friend, atheists and annihilationists have always been with us. They even existed in the religious fervor of the first century. I Corinthians 15:**12** *Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?* He speaks of some who denied the resurrection, who denied the life beyond. **13-19** *But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. 15 Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; 17 and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.* Here we have the great apostle facing head-on the implications of annihilationism. He says, "deal with this: if this life is all there is then your dead loved ones are gone, gone, gone.

What's more, your silly faith in Jesus is vain, and my life and mission are vain." If we are destined to die and rot then all becomes essentially meaningless. And in verse 32 he says, "if the dead are not raised let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die." Forget about your lofty ambitions and your high ideals, personal sacrifice is for fools, heroism is for suckers, you had better go for the gusto now baby because you only go around once and then you rot. That is annihilationism and where it leads you. How many of you like that option?

Paul didn't like it. In this same 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of I Corinthians he writes **58** *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.* And it is not in vain because **53-55** *For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. 55 O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"* And the ground and basis for Paul's hope of resurrection and eternal life is not sentimentality but the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise of God that whoever believes in Him will live forever with Him. Everybody knows, I suppose, that the Bible rejects annihilationism in favor of man's ongoing existence. Orthodox Christianity affirms that humans will continue to exist forever and ever. The one who knows God's word need not rest on sentiment or wish projection but has the promise of God Himself which is repeated so often in the Bible and is put in the plainest of terms that he who believes in Jesus will not perish but will have everlasting life. This is not only the Biblical view but the persuasion of most of mankind. You will find differences though as to what this ongoing existence will be like. Westerners, who have been so greatly influenced by Christianity, naturally think of our ongoing existence as being personal and conscious, but certain Eastern religions, like Hinduism, would affirm a continued existence that is not conscious at all. Hinduism vaguely affirms multiple incarnations until one achieves a higher level of being in which personality and consciousness become dissolved in the universal oneness. Do you get excited about that? About melting into the oneness of the universe? Me neither. And not only do we prefer it, but the Bible also teaches that our ongoing existence will be conscious. I will still be I and you will still be you. We will be improved hopefully, but we will always remain conscious, personal human beings, there is no dissolution of our personhood.

So, as we sharpen our focus on what the Bible teaches, we see that it affirms the ongoing existence of men, and that this existence will be conscious. Now let's consider how many possible eternal destinies there may be. Among those who call themselves *Christian* there are three different answers that I know of. Some say there is only one eternal destiny. Some say there are three eternal destinies. And some say there are two. Those who say there is one eternal destiny may be divided into two groups. Are you confused? There are two types of people who say there is only one type of eternal destiny. On your outline this is Roman numeral 2, point B, #1 little a and little b. The first group would be the universalists. These are they who claim that everyone is going to make it to heaven. Everyone will be redeemed in the end. Therefore, the only destiny for men will be paradise. Now certainly there are verses in Scripture, which, if taken alone, may lead us to think this. But the number of verses that plainly teach that not all men will be saved is so great that it does not merit comment. No serious student of Scripture believes the Bible teaches that all men are ultimately brought into God's kingdom. That is a fairly popular persuasion of religious liberalism however. The only denomination I know that espouses it on paper is the Unitarian Universalist Church which is sort of the denomination for sentimental unbelievers. The second group of people who believe in only one eternal destiny I will call the "Christian" annihilationists. These differ from the non-Christian annihilationists in that they teach that some will have eternal life; some will be saved but that everyone who isn't will be annihilated. These annihilationists may be lovers of the Bible but they reject the idea of an eternal hell and see the punishment for sin being carried out thru annihilation. Among these you will find Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah Witnesses. They believe in one eternal destiny, which is heaven, but deny that all men will be included.

Next, let's consider the view that there are three eternal destinies. The main place you will find this taught is in the Roman Catholic church. The three possible eternal destinies are: heaven, hell, and what? Not purgatory. Purgatory is not eternal. If you make it to purgatory you will spend eternity in heaven. The third eternal destiny, according to Rome, is what we call *limbo*. We use that term for someone stuck between two alternatives and *limbo* is a place between heaven and hell. The notion of limbo, or *limbus infantum*, was developed by the Catholics to get around the unpopular teaching that all unbaptized infants, who die in infancy, go to hell. The church said that they will not go to hell. But they went on to say they won't go

to heaven either. Never mind the fact that the Bible never speaks of such a place, you can appreciate the motivation behind such a doctrine. The Scriptures are annoyingly silent about the position and judgment of little children. The number of babies conceived throughout human history who never saw their fifth birthday is absolutely enormous. One is naturally reluctant to assign all these babies to hell. One has no basis in Scripture to assign these all to heaven. The descriptions of the population of hell do not fit these babies; but neither do the descriptions of the population of heaven. The Roman Catholic church has chosen to speak where the Bible is silent. The protestant church generally has not and I find myself having to be uncomfortably ignorant on some of these matters.

Finally, there are those who say there are two possible eternal destinies: heaven and hell. This is the position of protestant orthodoxy. It is also the position of Islam, the world's second largest religion. I find myself in this crowd because God's word tells us of two, and only two, eternal destinies. Look with me at Matthew 25. This is the judgment passage in which King Jesus, upon His return, separates and sentences the sheep and the goats. Look at what he says to each. **34** *Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 41* *Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels. 46* *These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'* There you have two eternal conditions described. There is eternal life, that which is commonly called *heaven*. And there is eternal punishment which is commonly called *hell*; and they are both called *eternal* aren't they? According to this verse the duration of the punishment is the same as the duration of the life, and they are both endless. Now this kind of teaching runs throughout the Scriptures. Not one, not three, but two basic eternal ends are held before us. The Old Testament book of Daniel said 12:**2** *Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.* This latter end; this bad news side of the matter is called by many different names. Eternal punishment, everlasting contempt, eternal destruction, the outer darkness, the eternal fire. And what did Revelation call it? The lake of fire. In Revelation 20:**15** *if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.* And five verses before, Revelation 20 had said **10** *the devil who deceived them was thrown into*

*the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.* There again we see that it is a place of eternal destiny. Those who abide in it will not be annihilated, but will be tormented without end. Revelation 14:**9-11** *Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 10 he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name."* And who do we find in that number, who are guilty of this damnable idolatry? Is it just a handful of wicked people? Oh no. Many there are, multitudes, in fact, who worship the beast and receive his mark. Revelation 13:8 says of the beast **8** *All who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain.* So, we end on the same note as last week. We see that all will go into the lake of fire and brimstone, the place of eternal torment unless (and what is the unless?) unless your name is in the book of life.

We are going to move on next week to examine more closely this Biblical doctrine of eternal punishment. For today I conclude with a few applications to think about. We have looked into the question of man's ultimate destiny. We have asked with Job, "if a man dies shall he live again?" And we have seen that God's word gives us a "yes" answer and presents two very different but equally eternal destinies for human beings. This being so I offer three concluding thoughts. #1 is that this life counts ®. If we have an eternity then this life matters after all and the choices you make have tremendous significance. You ought then to be very sober about it, and take seriously the condition of your soul. This is not all a cosmic joke. We are not poor players who strut their little hour upon the stage and then are heard no more. Our lives now count, because they count for eternity. Thought #2 is that since people will last forever, people should be high on our list of values. Know what I mean? Many years ago someone who lived in my neighborhood said this to me, quote, "I've wondered how you can spend as much time with your kids as you do, but after looking at your lawn I can understand

it.” By the grace of God, my lawn got better as my kids aged. I anointed it with some stuff from Wal-mart and prayed for it and God healed it, but what I wanted to say to that person is this: ”Well, yea, I’m into raising children, not grass.” I didn’t say that because it sounds so smug and self-righteous, but the basic point is true isn’t it? People last forever. What else can you say that about? Lawns don’t, houses don’t, cars don’t. What are you investing your life in? Thought #3 is that if I will live in heaven or in hell forever my primary task in this life is to secure my eternity, to make sure, as we said last week, that my name is in that book of life. Until that is taken care of nothing else is worthy of my attention. As Jesus said, "what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul." The question of your eternal destiny, now listen to me kids, and listen to me fathers and mothers, the question of your eternal destiny ought to be a subject of intense personal interest. Next Sunday we will see what God says about eternal punishment. I solicit your prayers for me as I preach on these things, and I solicit your serious attention to these matters of eternal weight. -Lets’ pray-