

FUTUREWORLD pt.13

ETERNAL PUNISHMENT pt.1 1-4-14

(Matthew 3) Back in the Spring we were engaged in a study of what the Scriptures have to tell us about the future. At that time we did not finish, but are now able to return to complete it. So, we find ourselves in futureworld part 13, and the plan is to take the next seven Sundays to examine the biblical teaching on the two eternal destinies which are commonly referred to as heaven and hell. There is the good news and the bad news. Which do you want first? Polls show that most Americans prefer the bad news first, so we are going to look first at what God says about future punishment and the eternal destiny we often call *hell*.

Now, if I were about the business of inventing a religion, of designing for myself a set of beliefs to make me feel good or to help me understand my world and cope with it well I would not include in my made-up religion the notion of eternal punishment. I have heard far too many people suggest that we Christians believe what we believe simply because we want to. But that is a statement of utter ignorance. No Christian that I know likes the idea of an eternal hell. If we believe it, we do so because the Bible teaches it and we are committed on principle and by faith to the authority of God expressed in His word. We are “Christians” and, because we are, we adhere to the teachings of? Of Christ. What He commands we must do because what He teaches we believe. And no one can call Jesus *Lord*, read His words, and then deny the doctrine of eternal punishment. It is taught in the book and not only is it taught in the book the one Biblical teacher who teaches it the most is Jesus Himself. In the gospel of Matthew alone there are over thirty references to future punishment which come from the mouth of our Lord. So, regardless of how my soul may shrink from the notion of eternal torment, my mind tells me that Jesus my Lord taught it, and so I too believe it. Most of you, because you have been Christians for some time, or because you were taught it growing up also believe in hell. But one of my chief concerns as I handle this awful subject is that for most of us hell is a doctrine we hold in our heads but is not a reality we feel with our hearts. I have sufficient brain power, and so do you, to open the Scriptures and search out precisely what is taught about hell in God’s word, but if our study only affects our creed and if it fails to penetrate our emotions and alter our behavior we lose. I have been stirred in spirit in my study this week. I have felt my eyes grow moist as I pondered these things, but I have been distressed over my coldness. So, I come into the pulpit requesting from the Father that He grant us tears, that He touch us deeply by what we hear. Spurgeon once told his ministerial students “*when you speak of heaven your face*

should glow and shine but when you speak of hell then your normal expression will do.” I think you can be overly somber even about this subject. I don’t want to do that, but I also cannot approach it light-heartedly. Most of you know I enjoy humor. I like to include jokes in my preaching and there are lots of funny jokes about hell, but you won’t hear them from me. I want nothing to detract from the sobriety of these meditations.

Today, I simply want to survey the Scriptural teaching on hell in order to show you that hell is a place or condition of unalleviated torment and misery in body and soul for impenitent sinners ®. To prove that proposition let’s examine what is taught in the Scriptures. As I said, most of what we learn about hell we get from Jesus and the greatest concentration of teaching is in the gospel of Matthew. Starting in chapter three we find John the Baptist speaking of Jesus who was about to begin his ministry. Matthew 3:**11-12** *I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.* The term *unquenchable fire* is one of the many images which describe something of hell. Jesus speaking this time in Matthew 5:**21-22** *You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. **29-30** If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.* Here we read several references to this place called *hell* which is, in the Greek, the term *Gehenna*. This word is a Greek form of the Aramaic expression *gee hinnom* which means *The Valley of Hinnom*. This was a real place, a valley south of Jerusalem. I saw it when I visited Israel in 1998. It is now a pleasant, grassy area, but it used to be a place where parents sometimes offered their children as sacrifices to the Ammonite god, Molech, in the days of the kings Ahaz and Manasseh. Jeremiah the prophet pronounced curses against this place and it came to pass that this place became the dumping ground for the city of Jerusalem. The garbage from the city was brought into this forsaken valley and burned. Hence this valley became a

type of sin and woe. “Gehenna” came to be used as a designation for the eternal fire of hell, for the place of final punishment. And in Matthew 5 we hear Jesus telling his hearers that it is better to lose a limb or an eye than to be sent to that awful place.

But “hell” or “Gehenna” is just one term used for final punishment. There are several others. In Matthew 8 we read of a judgment day scene and Jesus says, **11-12** *I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; 12 but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* Here Jesus paints a beautiful picture of heaven, of how we will enjoy a feast in the presence of the patriarchs but others, even and especially Jewish others, here called *the sons of the kingdom*, will be sent to outer darkness away from the light and beauty of God into a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew 10:**28** *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.* Part of the proposition I laid before you is that hell is a place of misery for body and soul, and here you find that stated as plainly as it can be. The eternal inhabitants of hell will be resurrected and given new bodies prepared for hell. For just as you have sinned in the flesh so God designs that you will suffer in the flesh. We look now at Matthew 25, the judgment scene with the sheep and the goats, where we read **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.* Here we read not of the hell of fire, but the eternal fire. That word “eternal” shows up again in **46** *These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.* This hell, this eternal fire, is the outer darkness, the eternal punishment of unrepentant sinners who are damned forever. Next, I direct your eyes to the fearful words of Mark 9:**42-48** *Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire, 44 where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. 45 If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell, 46 where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. 47 If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, 48 where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.* Do you get a feeling for what Jesus is communicating to us about this place? He speaks of a place of

torment where a man is burned with a fire that never goes out and is eaten by a worm that never dies. Now, you say, “Pastor, is this literal? Does he really mean a physical fire and a physical worm?” No, I don’t think he does. I think these are images. It would be kind of hard to imagine a place of literal fire and literal darkness. The most frequent description of hell is that it is a fire, or a lake of fire but is that literal? I don’t know. And I wonder why it matters. Some people feel relieved if you say that hell may not be a literal fire, but that’s no relief. Why do you think Jesus would pick an ever-burning pit or a lake of fire to describe the fate of the wicked? Is it not because these things depict a condition of unspeakable agony and misery? And do you suppose that if the symbol is that terrible the reality would be something less? Oh no. The symbols Jesus picks are meant to strike terror into our hearts. Are you terrified by the prospects of hell? If no - then you don’t understand it. If yes, then you do understand it no matter what you believe about the specifics of the place.

Well, let’s continue our survey. There are so many passages we could read. I offer just a couple outside the gospels. II Thessalonians 1:9 tells us about eternal destruction. II Peter 2:4 speaks of pits of darkness reserved for judgement. The book of Revelation speaks of the lake of fire which is the second death. 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 are chilling, chilling words. Revelation 20:**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. 20:**15** if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. 21:**8** But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.*

Again, what is communicated by all the images and pictures and descriptions of hell is that it will be a place of unalleviated torment and misery in body and in soul. And since it is such a horrible place, such a terrible destiny, we had better look at who will experience it. Again, we survey the Scriptures to see whom will populate this terrible place. Among the verses we have read we see that the devil and his angels will be there. Hell is often depicted as the place where Satan rules and

delights in tormenting the lost but that is not Biblical. Satan is himself the most tormented of all. But not only will fallen angels be in hell, so will fallen people. Revelation 21:8 includes the cowardly, unbelieving, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters and liars. 20:15 simply says that anyone whose name is absent from the book of life will go there. Revelation 14 says it will be the multitudes who worshipped the beast. II Thessalonians 1:8-9 tell us that eternal destruction belongs to those who do not know God or obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew 25 says the eternal fire is for those who selfishly ignore the needs of Christ-followers. Do you fit any of those groupings? And do you see that hell is not just the eternal abode of ax murderers? Dare I say as I look over that list that many of you, many of you, ought to fear. Maybe you have thought of hell as a place for the especially wicked but God's word says its not just for Hitlers and Stalins and Jezebel's but also for Bobs and Charlies and Heathers who are fornicators and drunkards, and liars and unbelievers.

Well, there I go slipping over into sermon application. The doctrine of hell is far from impractical. It has tremendous practical implications. There are three that I will mention today, and I think you will find them easy to remember. First of all, since hell is a place of unalleviated torment and misery you must do all you can to ensure that you don't go there. The good news about hell and the only good news about it is that you don't have to go there. All who have heard the message of Jesus have been offered a pardon, have been offered an alternative. Don't waste your opportunity. Come unto Jesus today. Turn from your sin; put your trust in Him. What is there so precious that it would stop you? What sin do you so cherish, what lust is so dear, what pride is so important that you would not lay it aside to know Christ and with Him eternal life. Listen again to those words of Jesus. Mark 9:**43** *If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire.* 9:**45** *If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell.* **47** *If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell.* I don't know about you but I am pretty attached to my hands, and my feet and my eyes. How do you think it would feel to pull out your eye and throw it from you? Well, Jesus says that if that is what it takes to keep you true to your Lord then do it because any pain, any effort, any humiliation is far better than eternal fire. What is standing between you and a commitment of faith to Jesus? Is it some cherished habit or illicit pleasure? Some relationship you are afraid to lose? Is it your reputation?

Whatever it is you have to seriously ask yourself if it's worth the price of eternal death, which is not annihilation but eternity in a lake of fire where you will be tormented day and night. How I pray that a legitimate terror of hell would shake you out of your lethargy. Some of you will not be drawn to Christ by the beauty of His salvation and the glories of His person so you need to be driven to Christ by the terrors of His wrath, by the warnings of eternal damnation. Flee the wrath to come! And you flee into the arms of a ready and able Savior.

Our second application, which is like unto the first, is that since hell is a place of unalleviated torment and misery of body and soul you must do all you can to ensure that your children won't go there. Now I could have said *family* or *loved ones*, the point applies to them as well but I decided to say *children* because relatively speaking there is a great deal more you can do for your kids than you can do for your big sister, or your uncle Charlie. It would not be true to say that the eternal fate of your children is in your hands but it would be more false to say that you have nothing to do with it. You certainly do. Your children are their own persons. They will make their own ultimate choices but you have more influence over them than anybody else on this planet and I pray you will determine to use that influence to its fullest extent to keep your kids out of hell. Practically speaking what does that mean? It means you teach your kids God's word. You lay before them the way of death and the way of life as plainly as you know how so they will choose wisely. It means you must walk before them in such a way that they would want the Jesus their Daddy loved. It means that you will warn them about the punishment for sin. I recall times when I groaned over the sins of our children and wept for them and warned them of what would happen if they continue in foolishness. More than once, when our children lied I took them to Revelation 21:8 where it says liars go to the lake of fire. Do we want our children to be afraid of going to hell? You bet. What kind of father would I be if I gave my son the car keys and said, "Go have fun," without offering him any warnings?" And what kind of father would I be if I failed to point out the greatest danger in the world? So, you warn your children about hell. You live like you mean what you tell them about it. Another thing you can do to keep your children from hell is to discipline them. And this is not just the pastor's opinion about child-rearing. Proverbs 23:**13-14** *Do not hold back discipline from the child, Although you strike him with the rod, he will not die. 14 You shall strike him with the rod. And rescue his soul from Sheol.* There is something about discipline consistently and lovingly applied that has, and I say this cautiously, a "saving" influence. A child that is disciplined learns early in life that sin is and will be punished; and such punishment serves as an inoculation

against the real thing. So, you warn and you discipline and you love and live as a Christian parent should love and live. As I thought about these things I was reminded of something James Dobson said. You may remember that about twenty years ago the basketball legend Pete Maravich collapsed and died at the age of 40 while playing basketball with James Dobson. On his radio program Dr. Dobson recounted the events of that day, his attempts to resuscitate the fallen brother, his meetings with the press, his contact with Pete's family; but what struck me was what he said to his son when he went home. James Dobson returned home and grabbed his teenage son Ryan, held him close and said, "Ryan, listen to me, listen to me. Whatever you do,® make sure that you will be there on the other side." If the reality of death moves a father in that way how much more the reality of hell. More than anything else I know I want our kids with us on the other side, saved from the fires of hell and safe in the arms of Jesus. Whatever I can give them to ensure that I am ready to give them. How about you Dad, how about you Mom? What are you giving your kids? Nintendo and a nice bike? An inheritance? Proverbs 11:4 *Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.* With a passion I want that for my kids. So, you discipline and teach and warn and hug and fast and pray and pray and pray some more.

Our third application: Since hell is a place and condition of unalleviated torment and misery you must warn others who are in danger of it. ® There is an interesting passage in Ezekiel 33 about the watchman. **1-11** *The word of the Lord came to me, saying, 2 "Son of man, speak to the sons of your people and say to them, 'If I bring a sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one man from among them and make him their watchman, 3 and he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows on the trumpet and warns the people, 4 then he who hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, and a sword comes and takes him away, his blood will be on his own head. 5 He heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning; his blood will be on himself. But had he taken warning, he would have delivered his life. 6 But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet and the people are not warned, and a sword comes and takes a person from them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require from the watchman's hand.'* 7 *"Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth and give them warning from Me. 8 When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will 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 from your hand. 9 But if you on your part warn a wicked man to turn from his way and he does not turn from his way, he*

will die in his iniquity, but you have delivered your life. Here the Lord compares the role of the watchman to the role he has given to his prophet. The watchman, by virtue of his position in the watchtower, and the prophet, by virtue of the special revelation he has received from God, are responsible to do something when danger is approaching. They are responsible to alert the people. Do you see that? And do you see what it is that makes the watchman responsible? It is his knowledge. Verse 6 says “if he sees...” that is what makes him responsible. Ezekiel was responsible to speak to the people because God has shown him that the sword, which is figurative for a foreign army, was coming on the nation. Ezekiel was required to warn the people not because he was a prophet but because he knew the truth. And the same thing that made Ezekiel responsible to speak makes us responsible as well because we can see approaching danger. We have read of what is in store for men outside of Christ and it would be irresponsible, indeed, immoral for us to be silent. The reception our message gets is often no better than it was for Ezekiel and that’s okay. The watchman is not responsible to make people believe or to make people act. What is he responsible to do? To warn. God says to Ezekiel 8 *When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you will 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 from your hand.* The watchman who sees the approaching danger but remains quiet is guilty isn’t he? You bet he is. He is morally compelled to get the message out and so are we.

There are many motivations I could set before you to get involved in fulfilling the great commission. I could speak of your love for Christ and His glory; I could speak of your love for lost sinners; but for now just consider this one: your God-given awareness of the fate of unbelieving people renders you responsible to warn, to witness, to declare to men their need for a Savior and the gospel of salvation. Don’t take the doctrine of hell and put it on some shelf in the back pantry of your mind. Seek to live in the light of eternal realities. Spend your money with eternity in view. Set your schedule with eternity in view. Jonathan Edwards is famous for his remarkable sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” We will read from it in two weeks. It was a sermon greatly used of God in the revival of the 18th century in New England. In that sermon Edwards powerfully set forth the awful danger in which unconverted people find themselves, and when he preached it many were pierced to the heart and moved to seek forgiveness and mercy from the hand of Christ. I believe Edwards could preach that sermon with such power because he had regularly asked God to stamp eternity on his eyeballs. “Stamp eternity on my eyeballs.” Do you understand

that image? Edwards wanted to see everything in the light of eternal realities, and what a difference it made for him and can make for you. Tell me, Christian, have you memorized any verses on the subject of hell or the wrath of God? Do any of your cute little refrigerator magnets remind you of the destiny of lost persons? It's disturbing yes, I agree, but we lazy comfortable Christians need to be disturbed and spurred to action. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army once said that he would like to have finalized the training of his Christian soldiers by giving them a thirty-minute vision of the horrors of hell that they would never forget. Well, brothers and sisters, God hasn't given us a videotape of hell but he has spoken of it in graphic terms. You've read them; you've seen them. You know of the coming danger for sinners in hell and so you must warn others, you must do all you can to ensure that your children won't go to hell and you yourself, as the first priority, must flee the wrath to come and run for salvation into the arms of Jesus Christ, a merciful Savior who stands ready to forgive, to protect, and to secure for you an eternity within His joy.