

What did
CHRIST
teach about
Heaven and Hell

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THERE WAS A TIME when I thought I knew this well. But this knowledge, which seemed so clear, so blessed, so wonderful when it first dawned upon me, changed more and more into an unsolvable problem, yea, even a hideous nightmare, because of the way the matter was presented to me in all the churches and meetings I attended.

It was a problem indeed. I knew that Paul had written in Col. 1:20: "By Him to reconcile all things to Himself," and in I Cor. 15:28: "That God may be All in all." Also in Rom. 11:36: "Of Him and through Him and to Him are all things." But then, had not the Lord Himself said: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God"? And was not what He had spoken the final truth about these things?

At that time I thought I knew also what it was to be born again. But I, as well as my friends and co-workers began to be burdened by the awful realization of the fact that almost the entire human race was not born again, and therefore lost. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life." We had Him, of that we were certain. And that certainty gave us cause for rejoicing and thanksgiving. But did not the verse go on: "He that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him"? Did this wrath not abide on nearly all those we knew and loved? The thought nearly drove us to despair. We made the most violent efforts to press all those around us into the "kingdom of God," to "pull them out of the fire." And, had we had great success, we might have been some-

what relieved. But the worst of it was that nearly all was in vain, when we had thought that God would surely bless our frantic efforts and give us souls in great numbers. The soil was so hard, the harvest so small, the power of the enemy so great, how were we to understand it? Why did God apparently do nothing to break this terrific power? How could He look on at all these "souls dying in sin"? Were they not damned for eternity? Did not His own Word confirm this? But what did it mean, when you really thought it through? Is it not that God had called billions into existence, knowing that their end would be everlasting fire? Did He not know all beforehand? And had He not, then, been creating men for this purpose for thousands of years? And had not billions lived without even a possibility of being born again? The Bible became a terrific riddle. Even the Lord Himself seemed to have said contradictory things. Did He not say of infants that their's was the kingdom of heaven? Were these babes in any way "born again"? Why, they had not even been baptized! And could anyone already be "born again" at that time? The Lord had not yet died. If the kingdom of heaven could be had before there was a cross of Calvary, why was it necessary for Christ to go to the cross?

And then Jesus told the people the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The one went to hell, because he had received his good things in his lifetime. The other went to heaven, because he had received evil. Was that a new birth?

We will not tire our readers with further examples. The matter is so serious, so important, the shadow which a false explanation throws on God's character so black, the consequences so awful (because men are driven away from such a God), that it is imperative to penetrate to the bottom of the question. So let us make earnest enquiries, whether the usual interpretation of these and other passages of Scripture is right. For these passages

are the ones generally quoted as being the final answer to such questions.

After long years of searching and studying the entire Scriptures, God gave me the great, liberating and satisfying solution—that all the passages quoted are clear and comprehensible, if applied solely to Israel in connection with the kingdom, promised alone to that nation, but that they raise endless and unsolvable problems as soon as we apply them to all men and eternal issues.

THE DIVINE REVELATION BEFORE CHRIST'S APPEARANCE :

The so-called "Old Testament" promises in an unmistakable manner the future kingdom of God on this earth. Its king is the Messiah, through whose rule "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14).

The proclamation of John the Baptist and of Jesus Himself was concerning this kingdom.

To enter this kingdom, Israel must be "born again." Only in this connection could Nicodemus, as a master in Israel, know of it, and could Jesus speak about it at that time. What is usually called a "new birth" today is impossible apart from Christ's death. Yet at that time this death was a thing nobody was able to clearly grasp.

Jesus Himself was very definite about the fact that He was sent to Israel only. He even forbade His seventy disciples to go to others than their own people. Paul says of Him, that He had been a "servant of the Circumcision." Not before Calvary was this revoked. Only after Israel's rejection were God's plans concerning all mankind made known.

Who would think of forcing Christians today to be circumcised? To introduce the Mosaic sacrifices and rituals into our modern churches? We recognize what belongs exclusively to the old covenant people. Yet we fail to draw the boundary line at the point when Israel was rejected and Paul commissioned to minister to the nations. We deliberately appropriate to ourselves what

Jesus Himself carefully restricted to Israel alone.

How could He forbid His disciples to go even to Samaritans, if He had already preached the "conditions for eternal salvation"? And what could these conditions have been at that time, as His death could not yet be proclaimed? Is it right to seek for light on these fundamental questions in such parts of Scripture in which only a shadow is glimpsed of His death, and He is misunderstood by His nearest and dearest; in parts that, on this point, do not differ from the revelations concerning the suffering Messiah in the sacrifices, the psalms and the prophets?

Recently I read in an evangelical tract: "There is an eternal hell, as sure as the Son of God, coming out of eternity, proclaimed it." One thing at least seems clear to the writer of this statement. That is, that the eternal God, who dealt with human sin thousands of years before Christ's advent, had *not* proclaimed it. He seems also to know, that the word translated "hell" in the "Old Testament" meant only the state to which all dead, even the righteous ones, returned. If not, he would surely have quoted the texts in which Jehovah had already threatened the first human sinners with the consequences of their offenses. Apparently he was unable to discover such texts.

But if "eternal hell" was such a well known place to God's Son, coming out of eternity, it must at least have been in existence as long as sin had existed! What else could have induced God to make such an institution? Why then did He keep it secret from sinners until Christ's coming?

Only one explanation could be offered, and that is that before Christ's coming nobody was ever sent to "hell," because nobody even had a possibility of getting saved.

That is all very well. But could anybody be saved before Christ died, saved and redeemed in the sense in

which we understand it? And did not Christ speak of these things when He was still living?

If we now scrutinize His "threats about hell" a little more closely we discover further peculiarities. To escape the hell of the Rich Man it suffices to listen to Moses and the prophets or to receive ill during this life. The goats to the left go into eternal fire, because they did nothing for their suffering brethren. You can escape the worm that dieth not, by mutilating your own body, whether figuratively or literally is here of no moment.

One thing remains certain. We have here a hell, from which man is not saved through faith in Christ, but from which he saves himself by his own doing. A hell in connection with which Christ's death on the cross is not even mentioned. And this is contrasted with an "entry to life," which man can accomplish himself, not only without Calvary's power, but before Calvary's cross existed. Nevertheless we are most emphatic in asserting that even the most godly and good are lost without Christ, no matter how much they labor and struggle. Anyone who is able to straighten this out, should do it. I was forced to give up trying.

And if hell was so well known to the pre-human Christ, why did neither Adam nor Abraham, neither Moses nor David ever say a word about it? These were men who learned much from God concerning sin and His thoughts about sinners! Have we any right to evade the issue by saying that since Christ appeared the time of ignorance has come to an end, and man is in danger of hell because of the clearer light that Christ brought? He who says so should first prove that the time of ignorance really came to an end then for the vast majority of mankind. Are we to believe that, up to the year of His birth, or maybe to the year of His death, all the heathen in far-away China had gone to heaven, but from then on, to hell?

May nobody say that it is irreverent to use such language! It must be brought to light what the usual "hell-doctrine" really means, when we think it through to its logical conclusion. If the sending of Christ was the one great revelation of God's love, bringing blessing for all the nations and the reconciliation of the world to Himself, it surely does not hurl the great majority of mankind into a hell concerning which God had not said a word until then. If hell were "the wages of sin," God would have made this known in due time. Why must arrogant man say "hell" when God has said "death," and so fill the Bible and Christian doctrine with contradictions that refuse to disappear until we give death the place God gave it? So also with the fire, the worm and all other judgments.

One who has realized that, in interpreting Scripture, it is most important not to apply everything to everybody without distinction, will receive a Bible full of light and consistent teaching instead of untenable notions that condemn themselves.

If Jesus really is what His name means, the great Jehovah-Saviour, it was not the object of His appearance to bring hell to all who did not accept Him at His coming. It was Israel alone to whom He came. Israel alone He addressed before dying for all mankind. Can we not see how utterly He confined Himself to Israel when on earth from the fact that even His disciples never thought He might also have come for the other nations? Not even after Jesus had instructed them for forty days concerning the kingdom did Peter know anything about His plans for others. He had to have the vision of the unclean beasts in the sheet before he could grasp this new truth.

Can we not see from all this, against what a false background we usually put the Lord's sayings? We connect them with ideas He never had in His mind and which no apostle could have connected with them. New

birth, salvation, damnation, heaven and hell, all these have become to us mental conceptions which we believe to be solidly anchored in the Bible, yet which we nevertheless sadly misunderstand, forgetting to whom and in what connection these things were spoken.

WHAT JESUS REVEALED

There are people today who, under the weight of evidence, acknowledge that "eternal" in the Bible does not mean endless, but who, in spite of this, insist on the endlessness of suffering in hell, because the Lord said: "Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." With this quotation they think they can still prove "eternal fire." As this seems to be the only argument left to them, it is worth while to demonstrate how untenable it is.

When our Lord came to this earth, this did not alter anything at first concerning the state of the vast mass of mankind and their standing before God. All were and remained what they had become in Adam, mortals on their way to death. It was just as Jehovah had told their first parents. Never did Jesus diverge from that. Never did He make death in Adam to mean life in unending anguish. He was the great, glorious expectation of all Hebrew prophecy. And in order to understand His words correctly we must also understand the prophets of old. What did they set before the longing eyes of the people? Was it bliss in "heaven" after death, or was it a renewed earth, in which the Anointed One of God would rule in righteousness? Were men to enter a "celestial kingdom" on high, or did this kingdom come down to them out of heaven? Would it be erected with the joyous applause of the nations or in the face of bitterest opposition and after terrible judgments? Everyone who knows his Bible a little, knows the answer to these questions. Did Jesus, John the Baptist, the Twelve and the Seventy proclaim the message of the heavenly kingdom drawing near to the Jew-

ish people, with its king and its power of healing and help for men on this earth? Or did they go to all nations with the gospel of the cross, that tears down all barriers between Jew and Gentile? Just as well as we know that the message of the cross was not proclaimed till after Israel was rejected, we know that it could not be proclaimed before there was a cross, we should also know that it will never do to sever vital parts of the kingdom message from where they belong and force them into the message of the cross, with which they can never harmonize organically.

What did our Lord have in view when He spoke of the worm and the fire? In Is. 66:23, 24 we read: "And it shall come to pass that from one new moon to another and from one sabbath to another shall all flesh come to worship before Me, saith the Lord. And they shall go forth and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against Me. For their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring to all flesh." Out of the preceding chapters we can clearly see that this will be in Jerusalem, in the kingdom of Messiah, which according to Rev. 20 lasts for a thousand years. The unbelieving dead are not raised till after the close of this period, when they shall be judged according to their deeds. If Jesus, in connection with the kingdom message, also mentions this place where the rebels will be disposed of, it only proves the faithfulness with which He kept His commission. And when He adds that this worm and fire destroy in "Gehenna," this ought to forestall any error. For Gehenna is a valley near Jerusalem in which the offal of the city and also the corpses of executed criminals were destroyed by fires that never were quenched and by worms that went on multiplying.

Is it faithful, reliable interpretation that bows before everything that is written, if we say "immortal souls" instead of "corpses," if we make a place of judg-

ment near Jerusalem to mean the future abode of all unredeemed mankind, if we turn events in the millennium into boundless eternity, the kingdom of God on earth into an unscriptural "other side," a punishment awaiting those unworthy of this kingdom into the fate of billions that never will come in contact with it? Can those who must fall back on such interpretations in order to prove an eternal hell be called trustworthy advisers and counsellors? Can we even hope to be able to realize clearly what the cross does stand for if we mix up its message with elements alien to it?

What is the new birth? It is the requisite for entrance into the millennial kingdom of Israel, the great national repentance and conversion of an accursed and rejected people, which can take place only when the King Himself appears in glory, so that all eyes will behold Him, also those that have stabbed Him, and when all tribes of the land (of Israel) will wail because of Him (Zech. 12:10; Rev. 1:7). The Jews proved themselves incapable of attaining to the new birth, when their Messiah came for the first time. In consequence they were cast off, lost their home and their temple, became a curse among all the nations and will remain under God's judgment until Christ comes for the second time, when all Israel shall be saved (Rom. 11:26).

All this Christian teachers have twisted until it means: "Whosoever is not born again will be lost for all eternity." What distortion of the Lord's words! No wonder they create such overwhelming problems.

What does it mean to be "lost"? In the Original it is the same word as is translated "perish" or "destroy" in most of its occurrences. When used by the Lord in connection with the kingdom message, it means to lose one's life during the judgments that precede His rule, without the hope of entering His kingdom, either by being preserved in the judgment or by resurrection. Only the righteous will be raised before (Rev. 20:5, 6;

John 6:40; 11:25). Applied to the rest of mankind, to be "lost" means to die without redemption and therefore to go into the second death, which Jesus, while on earth, never even mentioned.

And what does it mean to be "saved" or to attain to "eternal" or rather "eonian life"? Well, it means just the opposite of being lost. For Israel, it means entrance into Messiah's kingdom, into that glorious life of the future eons on this earth. In connection with the message of the cross to all the nations, which is valid today, it means the destiny of those called out to be members of Christ's body. These do not perish during the final judgments, nor must they remain in death until called by God before the great white throne. Their salvation is rapture, if they are still alive at Christ's coming, and out-resurrection, if they die before. And it is life with their glorified Head in His heavenly realms as long as the eons shall last. It was not Israel's Messiah on earth who proclaimed this message in Galilee and Judea. It was the resurrected and exalted Christ, sitting at the right hand of God, who entrusted this to His chosen instrument, Paul, as a special message. A message that could not be preached until Israel's callousness and rejection had become an irrevocable fact and the kingdom was put off, consigned to an uncertain, far-away future.

The defender of "everlasting punishment" shows clearly how untenable his doctrine is by his "proofs" which he takes from prophecies concerning the "day of the Lord." The one who preaches Christ to sinners as the only means of salvation and at the same time threatens them with judgment proclaimed before His death for their sins; who acknowledges no other justification than the one by faith, yet points to rewards for works (see the sheep and the goats) or even to compensation for earthly suffering (Lazarus), cannot claim to rightly divide the Word of Truth. If he wants to

know who the sheep and the goats are he should read Joel 4, then he will see of which judgment the Lord is here speaking. He should not drag generations into this judgment who will never stand there. Surely our blessed Lord, who will sit on this throne, knew of what He spoke and that He addressed people who were familiar with Joel's prophecy, but knew nothing of the cross.

God judges the vast mass of mankind later, when this judgment will be past for more than a thousand years (Rev. 20:5, 11, 12). And those who today accept Christ will not come into either of these judgments. They belong to the body of Christ, which the Lord will take away before they begin. Those who see the "ecclesia" in the "sheep on His right hand" know little about its destiny.

And what the Lord will do at the end of this and of the next eon cannot in any way alter His determination to become All in all, when even the rule of the Son comes to an end, because it has accomplished its purpose (1 Cor. 15:25-28). May this passage speak for itself. It does not contradict the worm and the fire, as so many imagine. The worm and the fire will not survive the rule of the Son. The prophets cannot say enough of the length, the constancy and the unshakable nature of His kingdom. To most Christians it therefore seems certain that it will be eternal. And yet Paul tells us that it will have an end. Not one of the old prophets foresaw this. It was also not part of Christ's commission to disclose this when He was on earth.

Because Jesus, as "Servant of the Circumcision" never went beyond the scope of what had already been revealed to His earthly people, either in plain language or in shadow and symbol, we could never understand Him, if He, as the first one, had stood up with such an awful, revolutionary message, changing the entire outlook, as the doctrine of "eternal hell" does. Fire and worm in the vale of Gehenna were familiar and

clear to His hearers. They knew what Isaiah had said about them. The nation had looked forward to the kingdom for centuries. The worst that could happen to an unworthy member was exclusion from this kingdom (compare Mat. 8:11; Luke 13:28, 29). The faint glimpse which they had concerning resurrection was connected with the entry into it. The other nations were to receive blessing and the knowledge of God during Messiah's rule. As far as they withstood Him, He would destroy them in the valley of Jehoshaphat or punish them with other plagues (Joel 4; Zech. 12 and 14). A believing Jew could not know any more through his sacred Scriptures. What a few sects supposed or what sophistic rabbis imagined is no concern of ours.

But did one single disciple of Jesus believe that all the heathen were eternally damned, and the greatest part of his own people likewise? Did one of them reason from His words as we do today? Many a parable was dark to them and they asked their Master for an explanation. On hearing the word of the narrow entrance into the kingdom, they were amazed and astonished beyond measure. But we do not read that they were shocked on hearing about the worm and the fire, as an entirely new and terrible message "out of eternity." It seems that they understood these things fully. They were acquainted with their own prophets. They expected no setting up of the kingdom without any judgments. They had no problems such as we have today because of our wrong interpretations. Even after Christ's resurrection they waited only for His ascension to the throne of David. No vision of "lost souls" drove them beyond the boundaries of their own people in order to "save" them. Even at Pentecost their message was the return of Messiah. What had the heathen to do with Him? When Cornelius received the Holy Spirit they were stunned with astonishment.

But did not Jesus Himself tell them to go to all

nations? Exactly so, but with the message of the kingdom, which has nothing to do with the fate of the individual after death. Pentecost was, for the apostles, the first step towards the inauguration of the kingdom. The other nations were to receive blessing in it on this earth, but not be Israel's equals. Because Cornelius seemed to become their equal they were astounded. And so our Lord's own disciples give us more light on the question of how we ought to understand Christ's "threats about hell." They do it by their whole attitude towards His commission, their own people and the other nations. These men had walked with Jesus right from the beginning. Had they been in error, the Lord would surely have corrected them, before sending them out with His message.

Did He not always instruct them, when the time for more and clearer knowledge had come? He explained to them His death and His exaltation, before they became witnesses of it. Through the vision given to Peter they learned of God's loving intentions towards the other nations. It seems that this was the first time they grasped them clearly enough to understand the allusions to this in the prophets (Acts 15). But where did He give them light that went further and beyond the kingdom? When did He teach them the truth for today on the ground of Israel's rejection? Did He ever reveal to them that the worm and the fire ought to be understood in a new and different manner, extending far beyond Jerusalem and the kingdom, being universal and eternal, more eternal even than His own reign? Where the Master did not correct the apostles we can well assume that they were right.

Fire and worm in the vale of Gehenna are clear and comprehensible. Put them into a "hell" on the "other side," and the problems pile up like mountains. No man has been able to find a solution. Those who think they have will meet with some contradiction to it

elsewhere in the Scriptures. And let us add here, that in the original text the verbs "dieth not" and "is not quenched" appear in the form which denotes a passing action, not a timeless fact. As this is not always easy to express in a modern language, this important and helpful guide towards right explanation has also been hidden from the average Christian.

THE WORD OF THE CROSS

Today we are bidden to preach the cross and not the kingdom, neither its blessings nor its judgments. The cross is a stumbling block to the Jew, not the fulfillment of his highest hopes. It does away with all his people's prerogatives. It is the great symbol of his rejection. Therefore not one of the twelve was able to preach it. That was entrusted to Paul alone and to those connected with him. Do not confuse the cross with Christ's sacrificial death. His death as the fulfillment of the entire Jewish ritual was also preached by the others. It brought about a shelter from sin, as the blood of the beasts foreshadowed. It protected from divine indignation. John the Baptist saw in Jesus the Lamb that bears the sin of the world. John writes of Him as the propitiation for our sins and for those of the entire world also. His blood cleanses from all sin. But the cross means more. It points to the *manner* of His death. The curse was connected with a death like this one. The cross is the display of what man is capable of in his own wisdom and religiousness. On the cross where Israel murdered its Messiah in order to bring Him under the divine curse, God revealed in His wonderful wisdom to the entire universe the abyssmal depths of depravity of the creature and the greatness of His own self-sacrifice and love. What was an act of wild hatred towards Himself He turned into a means of showing grace to all. On the cross all human virtue collapses. Israel has lost all claims to its privileges. God would have a right to cast it off forever. For as He ap-

proached it with the fulfillment of promise it refused Him. If He, after a long time of judgment, will accept this nation again, this will bow and humble them as nothing else could do so thoroughly. And in the meantime the cross gave God the opportunity of bringing the other nations to Him. Out of all mankind the cross gathers today an assembly, the ecclesia, Christ's body, standing on an absolutely different ground than the new birth for entrance into the kingdom. It is a new creation in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). In spirit it is already seated in these realms, that administration, following the kingdom, when God creates an order entirely new. In the kingdom the privileges of the covenant people are still valid. In the new creation these are all abolished, and therefore are today already abolished for all living in spirit in this new order. It is this significance of the cross which the twelve could not grasp. This was entrusted to Paul only.

Those in Israel who rightly understood God and His word, knew that it was His plan to bless all mankind in Messiah's kingdom. But further none could yet see. The idea that blessing for the nations was possible on the ground of Israel's rejection of Messiah and the consequent rejection of the kingdom people, was one that nobody could have grasped. Paul alone learned it through the exalted Lord. This is the foundation of his message of the cross. And now Paul's view is still further enlarged. He may behold what no one else saw before him. Not only does he see the entire earth blessed and saved, but all reconciled whom God created—even the principalities and powers of the heavens (Col. 1:20). So great is the power of the cross!

Those who accept it today become members of this body, through which God makes known to the heavenly hosts the greatness of His wisdom (Eph. 3:10). They have not only forgiveness of sin through the blood of the Lamb, but God's own righteousness is bestowed

upon them. All who are not reached by the cross today, or who reject it, must go into judgment, where they receive what their deeds deserve. They must go into the second death. They are not vivified or reconciled as long as death is not abolished. Only indescribable, unmerited grace makes it possible to escape this. But the fate of the others is not hopeless. The cross does not give us a blacker outlook than men of God had in olden times. It has opened to us vistas of divine glory and love, such as none of the ancients ever suspected. In the light of the cross we can see God's heart, how it embraces all He created. And we see everything in its right place, even His judgments. Without judgment, the creature cannot realize grace. Therefore the former was necessary, in order to prepare the road for the latter. Let us not confuse God's goal with the different steps leading to it. Gradually He has revealed it, drawing the circles wider and wider, one illumination following the other unto perfect day. We have a faint glimpse in Eden of the One crushing the serpent becoming brighter and brighter, until the rays lighten up the entire universe and nothing remains in darkness. And it is all occurring with marvelous order and succession, without flaw or contradiction, and leaving no problems and riddles, so that we can only adore God for such a revelation. Verily it is worthy of His name!

Not on earth did Jesus speak the last word concerning hell and heaven. For this, the highest unveiling, Paul was snatched away into paradise. Let us leave to the earth what belongs to it and let us thank God that we may look up to our Lord, exalted over all the universe, to Him who sent us a message out of His glory, concerning the consummation of His ways:

God All in all

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