

Session 8

Review

In our previous two meetings, we looked at the future judgment of believers trying to determine exactly what Paul was trying to tell us about the **βῆμα *bēma*** – judgment seat – of Christ in Romans 14:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:10. That discussion raised some questions that we really couldn't answer completely, like whether the judgment of believers will be at a separate time and place from the final judgment of unbelievers at the Great White Throne. But throughout that discussion, we emphasized that whenever and wherever Christ will judge true believers, it will not be a life-or-death judgment, but rather the weighing of our earthly works to determine our heavenly rewards. We hung this blessed hope on another passage from Paul of which we need to remind ourselves over and over again.

¹⁰According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. 1 Corinthians 3:10-

¹⁵ [ESV]

The Eternal Punishment of the Lost

Likewise, before we launch into our discussion of the Eternal Punishment of the Lost, it would be well to remind ourselves of what our LORD Jesus Himself taught about His final judgment when He returns – the famous parable of the sheep and the goats.

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

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41“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ 45Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Matthew 25:31-46 [ESV]

I can't speak for anyone but myself, but I find the idea of anyone suffering for all eternity in a lake of fire horrifying and heartbreaking. Indeed, if I were in God's place, I wouldn't have it this way. That's because we humans can't truly understand the utter holiness of God and His absolute abhorrence of sin. So, while I may be repulsed by the idea of anyone – even Satan himself – suffering for all eternity in torment apart from God, I truly acknowledge and believe what God has told us about this in His Word, as all true Christians must.

As usual, we will use [Death and Afterward](#) by [Dr. Lehman Strauss](#) as a means of ordering our discussion.

Hell – An Unpopular Subject

Denial is a universal human coping mechanism for dealing with unpleasant topics we'd rather not ponder too deeply. For example, it is much easier for us to simply say that the Holocaust didn't ever happen than it is for us to face up to the fact that human beings are capable of such atrocity. But the fact of the matter is that the human heart is intrinsically sinful due to the Fall, and there is no limit to the depravity into which we may sink. If we honestly and deeply search our own heart, every one of us will find this to be true just as God says.

5The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. 6And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. Genesis 6:5-6 [ESV]

Of course, our unchangeable God cannot truly repent of any of His works including the creation of man. These words in our human language are merely an attempt to make God's eternal plan of salvation comprehensible to us. The eventual separation of the sheep from the goats was God's intention all along – including His provision of Hell – a place or state for the eternal punishment of those who reject Jesus' Gospel.

Yet we humans continually deny these facts simply because we can't face up to them. There are innumerable jokes on the subject to divert us from the horrific character of Hell. The devil is depicted as a mischievous, but somewhat sympathetic proprietor of Hell rather than the pure essence of evil that he truly is, who will one day suffer eternal torment apart from God in the lake of fire that was prepared by God specifically for him, the angels who rebelled against God along with him, and all of those who reject the Gospel of Jesus Christ whose names are not found in the Lamb's Book of Life.

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Conversely, in order to rationalize our denial of the horrors of Hell, we often depict Heaven as not all that great. In fact, in popular culture, Heaven is seen as somewhat boring, having people with angels' wings and halos bobbing up and down on clouds and playing harps. We denigrate those whom we would expect to find in Heaven as insufferable do-gooders. Dr. Strauss quotes a letter from humorist Irvin S. Cobb regarding his requested funeral arrangements that reflects this mistaken attitude.

[Heaven]...must be a powerfully dull place, populated to a considerable and uncomfortable degree by prigs, time-servers and unpleasantly aggressive individuals. Hell may have a worse climate but undoubtedly the company is sprightlier.

This cynical characterization is marked by two distinct misconceptions. First that Heaven will be a somber and boring state of being. John's vision of Heaven tells us differently.

⁹After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Revelation 7:9-11 [ESV]

Second, Cobb obviously completely misunderstands – as do most people – the nature of how the population of Heaven will be determined – that is the separation of sheep from goats of which Jesus spoke. God's Word makes crystal clear that Heaven will be the future home solely of those whose names are found written in the Book of Life (Revelation 20:11-15), and that in turn is determined solely by our faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ (John 3:16-18, etc.).

False Theories

But in the very depths of our rebellious hearts, our persistent denial of the dichotomy between eternal joy in Heaven and eternal torment in Hell somehow doesn't ring true. So, our fallback mechanism for reckoning with the unpleasant prospect of Hell is rationalization. Dr. Strauss mentions three false theories about Hell that aid in this rationalization.

Conditional Immortality – As we have mentioned previously in our discussions, many people including my own mother and most of the members of my family believe that when the body dies, that is the end of our soul's existence. This idea of Conditional Immortality doesn't go quite so far as to deny the immortality of the human soul altogether. Instead, it postulates that eternal life is a reward given to specific individuals based on their works, but denies the idea of eternal torment of those to whom this reward isn't given. This idea comes from a wishful misinterpretation of scriptures pertaining to the subject.

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And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Matthew 10:28 [ESV]

The idea here is that the souls of those whom God condemns are simply annihilated, but do not suffer eternal torment. But this idea flies in the face of all the scriptures we've already looked at pertaining to the resurrection and final judgment of our souls, spirits, and bodies – particularly Hebrews 9:27, and Revelation 20:11-15.

Universalism – This is the “all paths lead to God” idea that has been promulgated throughout the years ever since Jesus ascended back to His Father. Universalism denies that anyone is in need of salvation out of sin, but that we are all inherently worthy of eternal life in the presence of the glory of God. Of course, this then blasphemously implies that Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross was unnecessary.

If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. 1 John 1:10 [ESV]

Dr. Strauss rightly points out that those who promote this view justify it by taking specific scriptures about Jesus dying to save everyone from death out of context, and forming them into the shape of the universalists' pre-conceived notion. Then Dr. Strauss himself does the same thing by saying that Paul was only referring to the Colossians when he wrote in his letter to them...

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. Colossians 1:28 [ESV]

Dr. Strauss purposely ignores the context of the verses between the letter's greeting and verse 28 to make this point. Aaarrggghh!!! One erroneous eisegesis can't be corrected by another!

In fact, Dr. Strauss didn't need to make this stretch to bring home his point. The universalist idea is clearly refuted by Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus in John 3, by John's description of the Great White Throne, by the LORD Jesus' teaching about the sheep and the goats we looked at earlier, and by many other Bible passages.

Sadly, the idea that all roads lead to Heaven is being preached throughout the world from the pulpits of ostensibly “christian” churches by self-professed “christians” including notably Pope Francis, and Protestant mega-church pastors like Rick Warren. These ignore Jesus' clear teaching to His apostle Thomas.

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” John 14:6 [ESV]

The Restoration Theory – This is a companion theory to Universalism. Those who hold to this idea don't deny that all mankind is dead in our sins and in need of rescue out of death, but then go on to say that God will restore *all* people to Himself at the final recreation of Heaven and Earth spoken of at the end of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Here again, this so-called “Restitutionism” clearly ignores other passages like Jesus' sheep and goats teaching and John's description of the Great White Throne.

And here again, Dr. Strauss joins the restitutionists by artificially limiting the context of some selected scriptures to claim that God's restoration of all things spoken of by Peter in Acts 3:19-21 applies only to the nation of Israel. Frankly, I'm too weary of this sort of expositional gymnastics to even delve into them unless specifically requested. It is laughable that after accusing the restitutionists of taking

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scripture out of context to prove a point, Dr. Strauss then does the same thing with the exact same scripture!

Dr. Strauss does correctly point out that when Paul wrote to the Philippians...

⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:9-11 [ESV]

...he was not implying that this act of contrition will lead to universal salvation. On the contrary, for those who made no such confession of faith while still alive, this final declaration of Jesus' lordship will be merely a confirmation of God's righteous judgment against their sin. Their fate of eternal suffering in the lake of fire will by then have already been determined, since their names will not be found in the Book of Life.

Arguing Against Hell from the Love of God

God willing, one of the "yeah buts" we will be taking up after our series on Death and Resurrection is the idea that a loving and merciful God would never send anyone to Hell. This is yet another form of denial in order to cope with an unpleasant subject. Those who promote this idea also make a distinction between the authoritarian "God of the Old Testament" who is totally inflexible regarding sin, and the entirely loving and forgiving "New Testament" LORD Jesus.

But this idea denies a fundamental assumption we need to make purely by faith about God – that He is eternal and unchanging. God forbid we would worship and serve a god who *could* change His mind. How could we possibly ever please such a god? Furthermore, our God is perfectly righteous and just. In fact, we inherited our own sense of justice from Him when He created us in His image. How could we consider Him righteous and just if He simply gave us a "pass" on the sins that He Himself has told us in His Word are punishable by death?

Those who argue against Hell from the standpoint that God is loving simply don't understand the depth to which God abhors our rebellion against His will, nor do they acknowledge that God has ceded to us the power to choose to follow and obey Him or not. But we'll hopefully take that subject up more deeply when we start discussing the "yeah but" objections people offer in response to evangelism.

Hell – A Literal Place of Future Punishment

Another form of denial about Hell is the idea that its eternal torment is merely symbolic – that regret over the lost opportunity for eternal life in the presence of God will be the cause of the torment. Once again, we see that this idea disregards clear Biblical teachings about torment by fire. It is very hard to imagine that all the talk in Revelation 20 about the lake of fire is merely symbolic of this regret. As Dr. Strauss points out, Jesus' own Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus speaks of the rich man being in torment and desiring that his brothers not have to suffer as he was. Surely, all parables use symbolic

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language to teach literal truths, but it is quite a stretch to reason that all the talk of fiery suffering in Hell is completely symbolic.

ASIDE – Before we move on, in all honesty we must acknowledge that our refutation of all these well-known denials and rationalizations against the idea of eternal torment in Hell is based upon the foundational tenet of our faith – that is the inerrancy of the Bible which we take to be the Spirit breathed Word of God Himself. Certainly, almost all of those who hold to these erroneous beliefs regarding Hell also deny the veracity and authorship of the Bible as we understand it. In fact, the Biblical arguments they offer in support of these beliefs are given to convince us who hold to the Bible as the sole source of God-given Truth, not to convince themselves who deny the validity of scripture in the first place!

Will Future Punishment be Endless?

This seems to me a “no-brainer,” so I won’t delve into it very deeply. We have discussed in our session on Man – A Trinity the idea that mankind is created as eternal beings in the very image of God Himself, who is without doubt eternal and unchanging. We decided in those discussions that our souls and spirits are eternal, and that only our mortal body is subject to death. Furthermore, in our sessions on immortality we found that our bodies will also be eventually resurrected and become the eternal dwelling of our souls and spirits just as we were created as immortal beings in the beginning before the Fall of Man.

With those assumptions then, it follows logically that our status as either sheep or goats after the final judgment will also be eternal – either eternal life in the presence of the glory of God or eternal torment in the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his fallen angels.

ASIDE – The very question we are asking here makes a fundamental assumption about the passage of time following God’s restoration of His creation. In a very real sense, even time itself as we (very poorly) understand it did not exist before God said “Let there be light.” Our understanding of God’s own being prior to creation is vague to say the least. It stands to reason that our understanding of His existence and our own following His recreation of the universe will be just as flawed.

Where Is Hell?

We have no possible Biblical basis upon which to formulate an answer this question. To begin with, we have no clear understanding of the essential nature or location of the “holding cells” known as Abraham’s Bosom, Sheol – **שְׁאוֹל** *š’ól*, and **ᾗδης** *hades* that first led us into this series on Death and Resurrection. How much less then can we make any Biblically valid conjectures about the location of the eternal Hell – known as the lake of fire and the outer darkness? In fact, just as the question about the eternal nature of punishment for unbelievers reflects complete ignorance of the nature of time following the recreation, so this question about the location of Hell reflects ignorance about the eternal nature of space. Like time, space didn’t exist at all before the original creation. So, we really can’t say with any certainty if space and time will exist as we know them following the recreation. Therefore, we can’t even guess

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about the location of the eternal Hell since we don't know whether there will even be such a thing as a location for anything.

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Discussion Questions

1. Is eternal punishment by fire in Hell real, or merely symbolic of regret?
2. Do the alternative theories about Hell we examined have a valid Biblical basis?
3. Are our refutations of these alternative theories valid given that they are all based on faith in the inerrancy and authorship of God's Word?
4. Would/could a truly loving and merciful God send anyone to Hell?
5. Can God be loving and merciful yet righteous, holy, and just?
6. Can we make any determinations Biblically about the location of Hell?
7. Can we say anything about eternity from a Biblical basis?