

Taking the Lid Off Hell

A Preview of Things to Come – Part IV

Revelation 14:10-11

Introduction

A popular church consultant and leader within the evangelical church wrote in one of his books, entitled *The Baby Boomerang*, these words:

Have you ever taken the time to read messages by some of the great nineteenth-century preachers . . .? If you have, you will probably have noted that [men of that era] addressed quite a different crowd than we do today and they addressed them in a very different manner. And because of those differences, I disagree with those who say that such messages are appropriate for our time.

This, by the way, would rule out Jonathan Edwards' classic sermon, entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," that brought in the Great Awakening.

This popular leader went on to write:

You see, people in our culture are truly broken and deeply wounded. They need desperately to be healed and put back together.

Obviously, this raises the point that people in Edwards' community in 1734, were, evidently, not broken and in need of healing.

This consultant concludes:

Yes, different times do require different messages.ⁱ

Unfortunately, this kind of consulting has won the day in the evangelical church – primarily in America – and in our generation.

A host of pastors and professors now consider the idea of preaching on the subject of accountability before a God of wrath and judgment, along with any mention of hell and fire and judgment, to be less than practical and a stain on the reputation of Christianity.

As a result, one pastor advertises his church in this way, "There is no fire and brimstone here. No Bible-thumping. Just practical . . . messages."ⁱⁱ

This is as if learning how to stay out of hell is not practical. It is as if knowledge on how to avoid the wrath of God is not something really good to have.

Another pastor said, "Services at [this church] have an informal feeling. You won't hear people threatened with hell or referred to as sinners. The goal is to make them feel welcome, not drive them away."ⁱⁱⁱ

Can you imagine a medical doctor applying this approach with his patients? He will never suggest they need medicine and he will not refer to the diseases they have by name – that would be too personal. He will certainly not recommend surgery – that would be way too invasive. He will not tell them they are sick, even if they are terminally ill. His goal is to simply have them visit his practice and feel welcomed – he does not want to drive them away.

What kind of doctor is this? I will tell you what kind of doctor this would be – in a word – unemployed.

How many preachers should be!

One author wrote:

No wonder nominal Christians [and even unbelievers] leave church feeling upbeat [for having been in the service]. Their self-esteem is safely intact. Their minds and hearts have been sparked and soothed with sound-bite theology, Christian maxims, and a few practical pointers dealing with [themselves], kids or work. . . . has the Word of God . . . penetrated comfort zones and the veneer of self-satisfaction . . .?^{iv}

The resulting challenge is that if the goal of the gospel is to make people feel comfortable, then obviously, the gospel has to be redefined, right? This is because the gospel is full of uncomfortable truths.

Is it any wonder then, in our generation, anything of the gospel that is personal, confronting, or distasteful is being peeled away?

In fact, one survey that I read recently, taken from among students who were attending an evangelical seminary, revealed that 46%, or nearly half of the students questioned, felt preaching about hell was "in poor taste."^v

Somewhere along the line, the professors of these students failed to inform them that Jesus Christ had

more to say about hell than all the prophets and apostles throughout all of scripture *combined*. He talked about it more than anyone else – so He spoke often in poor taste?!

We would think Jesus would have wanted people to know the uncomfortable truth of coming judgment.

The truth is that a gospel message that downplays the wrath of God does not help people, it hurts them. It is another gospel.

The gospel is essentially telling people there is danger ahead. Anything less than this is tantamount to spiritual deception.

This is like a man taking a group of people out on his boat a mile or so above Niagara Falls and, as they get caught up in the current, telling them to enjoy the ride and to just ignore the crashing sound up ahead. There is no need to feel uncomfortable!

Jesus Christ is not interested in how comfortable we will be in a shroud. He is not concerned about designer coffins.

My friend, the core of the gospel is not personal comfort – it is personal, radical conversion.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ were not to save us from boredom, poverty, a bad back, or low self-esteem. He came to redeem us from spiritual slavery to sin and save us from everlasting judgment.

The apostle Paul wrote,

... the wages of sin is death ...

In other words, the paycheck for sinners is death.

... but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

This gospel message is going on a worldwide tour in the future. It will be preached around the globe without apology; without advertisement contracts; without local sponsors or ticket sales.

The messengers happen to be three unique angels and their messages in the future are as important for us today as they will be to the world during the Tribulation period.

Thus far in our study, we have listened in on the first two angels. Their sermon manuscripts are found in Revelation chapter 14.

1. The **first angel** that circles the globe preaches the gospel highlighting creationism as he declares in verse 7,

... worship [God] who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters.

2. The **second angel** preaches, in verse 8, of the consummation of God's reign as the kingdoms of the world collapse and Babylon falls.
3. Then the **third angel** appears. He would never be invited into the average church in America and certainly not into most seminaries. Why? Because he delivers a gospel of condemnation which describes in vivid detail the horrors of hell.

Angel Messenger of God's Wrath

In our last study, we began to expound on the clear meaning of this third angel's final message. We discovered that the grace of God is allowing the entire planet to hear, one more time, a warning of the coming wrath of God and of salvation by faith in the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ the Lord.

In the immediate context, the entire human race is warned that those who follow the antichrist and take his name on their hand or forehead, as a pledge to their worship of him, will be condemned.

In the fuller picture of God's judgment, as we will see in chapter 20, the message from this angel describes the coming horror of hell.

This third angel also, literally takes the lid off of hell – it is no longer hidden; it is exposed for everyone to see.

This paragraph in Revelation 14 has caused more heartburn than almost any other text of scripture for religious groups all over the religious map. Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, liberal Baptist, Roman Catholics, and Emergent Church leaders alike – anyone who does not believe in a place of conscious, eternal torment is going to have to do something to get around Revelation 14:9-12. They are going to have to redefine it, dilute it, give it an escape hatch after a certain amount of time, disregard it, or just plain disbelieve it.

Let me say that in his opening comments, this angel delivers unpopular truths about the wrath of God.

1. **The wrath of God is personal and terrible.**

Let us look closely at verses 9-10 of Revelation 14, where the angel's message is that God's wrath is personal and terrible.

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,

“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 . . .”

And this is just the beginning.

Notice the personal pronouns in verse 10.

***he** also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God . . . **he** will be tormented with fire and brimstone . . .*

The wrath of God is personal and it is terrible. John writes in verse 10 that His anger is like undiluted wine – it is straight wrath; 100% fury.

This warning is not just for Adolf Hitler, Jack the Ripper, people who look better than you, and whoever you want to lump in there – Madoff; Michigan State fans – these were all the M’s I could think of!

This is the startling thing about the angel’s message. Had this warning come to mass murderers, child molesters, serial rapists, despots, dictators, and tyrants, most people would say, “Yeah, they’ve got it coming! I believe in hell because Hitler’s got to be put somewhere!”

However, this warning happens to be for everyone who denies the glory of a creator God (verse 7), who places their faith in false religion (verse 8), and who worships someone other than Jesus Christ (verse 12). This warning is not just for all the really bad people in the world; this warning is for the person sitting in your seat – and even for people standing behind wooden things called pulpits.

This is the point at which religion goes into hyper-drive. “This can’t be! I mean, if we’re going to go along with this judgment of God, we’ve got to come up with something a little more palatable than fire and brimstone for non-Christians. How barbaric is that?”

This is not very appealing to the masses. It is not even politically or religiously correct.

“This is going to drive people away!”

Yes it will – but it will bring some to the cross. Perhaps you today – run to the One who bore the wrath of God on the cross for you, so that by faith in Him alone, you will be delivered from the wrath to come. You will be rescued from the wrath of God, which this angel describes as personal and terrible.

Furthermore, I would outline this angel’s sermon with another point.

2. The wrath of God is not only personal and terrible, it is painful.

Go back to verse 10 to a phrase that has religion scrambling for loopholes like never before.

. . . and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.

The devil is not going to be managing hell – he is one of the occupants. Demons are not terrorizing people with pitch forks. Hell is primarily created for the devil and his fallen angels (Matthew 25:41), but they are not running the place. Hell is under the control of an omnipotent, omnipresent God and the hosts of heaven.

Now, notice the descriptive phrase that informs us of hell’s torment. The angel describes it as a place of . . .

. . . fire and brimstone . . .

The words “fire” (πυρ) and “brimstone” or “sulfur” (θειον) occur together six times in the book of Revelation. Four times they refer to the lake of fire and brimstone or sulfur that is the final destination of unbelievers.^{vi}

This phrase, “fire and brimstone,” takes us back to Genesis 19:24 when,

. . . the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire . . .

The psalmist David said,

Upon the wicked [God] will rain coals of fire, fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup. (Psalm 11:6)

The prophet Isaiah said that the vindicating, judging breath of the Lord is,

. . . a stream of sulfur . . . (Isaiah 30:33 ESV)

Sulfur is a yellowish element that burns with a blue flame while emitting a noxious, suffocating sulfur dioxide gas.^{vii}

Sulfur is found in volcanic regions such as Sicily, Iceland, and areas of Japan. I remember flying in a helicopter over a dormant volcano in Japan. The pilot actually flew over the mouth of the volcano and it was a spectacular sight. It was also quite unnerving, but the guide told me not to worry because the volcano had not erupted for a hundred years. Great . . . let us move on.

Imagine being brought to final judgment where we are told in Revelation 20 that all the condemned of humanity will be thrown into this permanent lake of fire and brimstone. Imagine being given an

immortal body that will be survive this torment and yet, suffer in it as well.

The thought of molten rock, poisonous minerals and gasses, the pain of fire, the endless existence of suffering and torment should cause one to repent and turn to Christ for His salvation.^{viii}

This is the point of the angel's warning. This angel is suggesting that this is a place we may want to avoid!

There is no need to risk this; there is no sense in bravado – and there is no way to erase this from scripture.

Paul “Red” Adair was the oil field firefighter first made famous by a 1968 John Wayne movie called *Hellfighters*. After the First Gulf War, Red Adair led the effort to cap the Kuwaiti oil wells set ablaze by the defeated army. Adair was a brash, fearless fighter. He joked in 1991 that it would be no different after he died. He said, “I’ve made a deal with the devil. The devil is going to give me an air-conditioned place when I go down there, if I go there, so I won’t put all the fires out.” Adair died at age 89 . . . the devil, he may have discovered by now, is a liar.^{ix}

Besides, the devil does not control the temperature in hell, or its punishments. They are controlled by a God who will demonstrate His wrath against all unbelief.

In hell, it will be sinners, not in the hands of a failed devil, but in the hands of an angry God.

This wrath of God will be personal to all who suffer; it will be terrible – undiluted anger. The wrath of God will be painful.

There is more to this angel's warning.

3. The wrath of God is eternal.

The angel goes on to say in verse 11 of Revelation 14,

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.

Again, the specific context of this verse is regarding those in the Tribulation who choose to reject Christ and worship the antichrist. The larger context, expanded in chapter 20, reveals that these people will eventually join with all unbelievers from the beginning of time to the end of human history as we know it and be cast into the lake of fire.

It is immediately obvious that this angel would strongly disagree with those who deny the eternity of hell.^x

There are more and more in our generation who are abandoning this element of the gospel as quickly as they can throw it overboard.

And they must contend with Christ who said in Matthew's gospel that those who are condemned *will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life. (Matthew 25:46)*. In this text, the parallel between “eternal life” and “eternal punishment” clearly states that both are without end.^{xi}

In other words, the torment of the lost in hell will last as long as the blessedness of the redeemed in heaven.^{xii}

Jesus Christ refers to the,

. . . unquenchable fire (Mark 9:43)

He refers to hell as a place,

where their worm does not die, and the fire in not quenched. (Mark 9:48)

His message is consistent with the prophet Isaiah, who also said that transgressors will suffer where,

. . . their worm will not die and their fire will not be quenched . . . (Isaiah 66:24)

Jesus related the story of Lazarus and the rich man who both died. Lazarus went to Paradise and the unrepentant rich man, who had known Lazarus through life, went to the place that Jesus described as a place of “torment” and was “in agony in the flame.” (Luke 16:22-24)

Questions on Eternal Punishment

Now let me ask and answer four questions relative to this doctrine of eternal, conscious punishment.

1. The first question: Are the flames literal flames; is this really fire?

We have a choice – either we hold to “sola scriptura” and let the scriptures alone answer this question or we scramble for another explanation.

Beyond what we have heard from the lips of Jesus Christ in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and from the pen of Isaiah, another clear insight is provided in the parables.

When Jesus Christ preached His parable of the wheat and tares, it is interesting that each element was given a figurative meaning, except for the fire.^{xiii}

In Matthew 13, our Lord explained that the one who sows the good seed is the Messiah; the field is

the world; the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom; the tares are the sons of the evil one; the enemy who sowed the tares is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age; the reapers are angels (Matthew 13:37-40). But then, Christ stepped away from parabolic analogy and said,

The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness,

and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth

. . . He who has ears, let him hear.

(Mathew 13:41-43)

In other words, “Are you listening? Everything in this parable has another figurative meaning to describe what will happen except for the fire in this place of torment. This is literal.”

2. The second question: If the fire is literal, then it will consume, right?

In other words, we can believe in annihilationism. This popular belief that is giving more and more evangelicals a loophole, states that after some time, depending on the wickedness of the sinner, their soul will be annihilated; extinguished.

I would love to believe this. However, the angel in Revelation is clear – the torment of unbelievers, like the smoke of the fires that torment them, is forever.

In the same way the resurrected body of the believer is raised to enjoy the eternal state of heaven, the resurrected body of the unbeliever is equipped to endure the eternal suffering of hell.

One evangelical stalwart said that there are those today who tell us the wicked will be burned up . . . that there is no such thing as an everlasting hell. I would like for these fellows to explain to me, if God is going to burn up the wicked, why He doesn't put out the fire.^{xiv}

You might ask, “But doesn't the Bible say that the unbeliever will be destroyed?”

Yes, Peter writes that a judgment of,

. . . fire [is coming] for the judgment and destruction of ungodly men. (II Peter 3:7)

The word for “destruction” is “apoleia” (ἀπολεία) and it can be translated “ruined”.^{xv}

In fact, the same word is used by the disciples in Matthew 26:8 to speak of the ointment that had just

been poured on the head of Jesus – they complained that it had been wasted or ruined. The ointment had not ceased to exist, but its purpose had been wasted, in their assessment.

In the same way, the unbeliever is destroyed – his life is ruined and eternally wasted in the assessment of God's word.

So the fire is literal and yet, the flames only torment, they do not consume.

3. The third question: Is this really eternal?

In other words, “Does forever mean forever?”

The angel warns in verse 11 of Revelation 14, that this is,

. . . forever and ever . . .

This Greek construction appears eleven times in the book of Revelation.

- It expresses the eternal existence of God (4:9-10; 7:12; 10:6; 15:7).
- It speaks of Christ's eternal existence (1:18).
- It speaks of God's eternal reign (11:15).
- It is used to speak of the eternal glory of the Lamb (5:13).
- It appears to describe the eternal reign of the believers (22:5).
- It tells of the eternal doom of the devil (20:10).
- It is used to speak of the eternal torment of the lost (14:11; 19:3).^{xvi}

Eternal means eternal.

The same Greek word used over and over again to speak of the eternity of heaven is used to speak of the eternity of hell.

No semantic manipulation or clever treatment of scripture can erase the horrifying message contained in the gospel that just as heaven will last forever and ever, so will hell.

Let us look at one last question.

4. The fourth question: Is there no way out of this?

Certainly, religions worldwide have found loopholes.

Universalism is one of these. Growing in popularity, this belief says that hell indeed lasts forever, but the devil and his angels are the only inhabitants simply because everyone will be saved.

In differing ways of explaining it, Universalists believe that everyone somehow connects to some

truth about Christianity. Even though they deny the deity of Christ and many other cardinal doctrines, they somehow intersect with the truth somewhere and they will be allowed into heaven. If all they believe in is some kind of divine force out there, it is enough of a connection that God will overlook even their denial of who Christ is, and let them into heaven.

A gentleman came up to me after a service and handed me a bulletin of a church he had visited while traveling in another state. He said, "This is an illustration of what you've been preaching about in Revelation concerning inclusivism and universalism."

This man had attended a large, rather famous Protestant church on a day they happened to be celebrating Communion. The bulletin was several pages long and the service was well planned.

The opening statement in this bulletin gave the church's mission statement. It read, "We believe in one God, known to us in Jesus Christ, also known by different names in different traditions. . ."

This is a tip off.

The program continues along just fine – in fact, some well known hymns are sung that clearly honor the triune God. However, the confusion returns when later in the program, the worship leader says, "Alleluia, we break this bread for those who journey the way of the Hindus, for those who follow the path of the Buddha, for our sisters and brothers of Islam, for the Jewish people from whom we come, and [just in case we left anyone out] for all those who walk the way of faith."

Yes, and broad is the way that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13).

I thought it was interesting, as I read this bulletin, that after having joined with Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, the congregation sang another hymn that entirely contradicted who they were and what they believed. I guess they were not checking out the lyrics. The hymn stanza said,

Salvation to God, who sits on the throne!

Let all cry aloud and honor the Son;

The praises of Jesus the angels proclaim,

Fall down on their faces and worship the Lamb.

Talk about being confused!

"But everybody's getting into heaven and that's what matters."

No, what matters is the glory of the Lamb and the honor due His name.

Paul made it clear when he wrote,

. . . whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Romans 10:13)

This is not whoever will call on *any* name, but whoever will call on *His* name. Paul went on to say,

. . . faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17)

We do not have to travel far to hear the sounds of Universalism. Our own *News and Observer* ran an article in the faith section a couple of weeks ago on the Unity Church of Wake County. It claims to be a Christian movement. One of the pastors interviewed said, "We honor all religions. Unity is a spiritual movement that respects the individual's right to choose his or her own unique path to God. Unity practices positive practical Christianity . . . we honor the universal truths in all religions."

Obviously, Jesus Christ presents a problem, but not for this congregation. This minister said, "We see Jesus as a master teacher of universal truths . . . we believe Jesus expressed His divine potential and every person has the potential to express that same perfection."

Is this not reassuring? Like Jesus, we can live up to the potential of our perfection.

Right across the page was a question and answer guy; sort of a religious Ann Landers. This author answered a question about getting to heaven by responding, "We can't know who has the right password until we die. Testimony from our own sacred scriptures doesn't suffice. [One doesn't get the password until after they are dead.] Christianity has to deal with the exclusivist claims of John 14:6, where Christ said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through Me.' But even with this belief, there's theological wiggle room for those who want it." He ends by writing, "Resolution will only come when our souls stand before God in judgment after death."^{xvii}

I have news – it is too late then – unless everyone is getting in.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is not one verse of scripture that tells us that we will get the right password after we die; we get it before we die. This is the password – unless you want more wiggle room,

Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Romans 10:13)

The fact that we are given the password now, gives the angel objective reason to let us know that we are blessed. Look at the way John follows all the talk of the wrath of God and the future of those who die without Christ in verse 13,

Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord . . .

How are we blessed when we die? When we die “in the Lord”! That is, we die in the knowledge that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, is our living Lord. And since the Lord is alive, after we die, we shall live forever in Him.

Conclusion

What a great text this is for Easter – you might have thought I had forgotten.

He is risen – He is risen indeed.

He is risen – He is risen indeed.

He is risen – He is risen indeed.

Our appreciation for the resurrection of Christ is only genuinely possible because we believe who Christ is. Our appreciation for Him grows when we understand that He came to bear the wrath of God on our behalf; to take our punishment for sin away.

Christ is not just a teacher. He is not just a model of perfection. He is our Savior. We have come to Him for forgiveness and He has given us the password to everlasting life!

This would be the final point of this angel’s sermon – the wrath of God is not only personal and terrible and painful and eternal, it is entirely avoidable – through Jesus Christ our Lord.

ⁱ John MacArthur, Ashamed of the Gospel (Crossway, 1993), p. 120.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 47.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 47.

^{iv} Douglas D. Webster, quoted by John MacArthur in Ashamed of the Gospel (Crossway, 1993), p. 121.

^v Ibid., p. 65.

^{vi} Stewart Custer, From Patmos to Paradise (BJU Press, 2004), p. 160.

^{vii} Mark W. Wilson, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Revelation (Zondervan, 2002), p. 92.

^{viii} Custer, p. 161.

^{ix} Lee Eclov, “Obituaries,” Chicago Tribune, 8/10/04, <http://preachingtoday.com>.

^x John MacArthur, Revelation: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 2000), p. 92.

^{xi} Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology (Intervarsity Press, 1994), p. 1148.

^{xii} MacArthur, Revelation, p. 92.

^{xiii} Donald Grey Barnhouse, Revelation: God’s Last Word (Zondervan, 1971), p. 270.

^{xiv} Oliver B. Greene, quoted by Daymond R. Duck and Larry Richards in The Book of Revelation (Thomas Nelson, 2006), p. 213.

^{xv} Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 781.

^{xvi} Robert L. Thomas, Revelation: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1995), p. 211.

^{xvii} The News and Observer (Feb. 19, 2009).