

Hell, It Really Is

by Greg Livingstone

If you are a serious Christian, somewhere along the line, you have realized that there is existence after death, "in the presence of the Lord" or "in heaven." But with considerably less comfort, you realize the opposite as well: that there really is existence after this life, separated from God...hell. Maybe you are not quite sure if you believe in hell, or if you do, why, but it's one of those beliefs you secretly hope your non-Christian friends are not aware of.

When I was first challenged with Christ's claims regarding hell, my first reaction was negative. I figured that if God is a good guy, He must like me. After all, most people like me. What's God's problem if He can't like me, a regular guy? Even after I became convinced that the Scriptures are authentic communication from God, and therefore, not to be trifled with, I had a lot of difficulty swallowing the words "hell fire." Surely God is clever enough to have a plan B.

But then I realized how utterly ugly, gross, wicked and manipulative I myself was, and I saw that the real intellectual problem is not so much why "good guys" go to hell, but why anybody deserves to have their slate totally cleansed and be invited to enter the presence of a Holy God. The more I experience mankind with all his self-centeredness, hypocrisy and dark side, the more I realize that the biggest intellectual problem is why everybody isn't banned from the presence of God into everlasting separation.

REAL LIVES HEADED TOWARD HELL

Still, this didn't help much when I landed in Bombay, India in my first missionary endeavor and faced multitudes of people scurrying here and there, so thick that I couldn't see the sidewalk. Millions of real people. None of them Christians. "Could all of these people really be headed for a Christless eternity?" I asked myself.

Later, while sharing Christ at the American University of Beirut, I befriended a Muslim from Libya. He came to the brink of the Kingdom. His greatest stumbling block was, "How can I go back to Libya as the only person who is right, the only person who is saved? Could it be that the entire population of Libya is under the wrath of God, headed for 'punishment with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord'?" (II Thess. 1:9).

FACING HELL'S IMPLICATIONS

I know that if God were to invite me to make proposal for a change in His Constitution - if I could change any of these issues of reality, the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith - I would vote to eliminate hell. I mean, who needs it? Think of the implications of really believing in hell! Before I became a Christian, I was a fairly carefree guy, nobody to worry about except myself. After I became a Christian, suddenly I had to worry about 2.7 billion people, 11,000 people groups without a church - most of whom don't even have a witnessing Christian in their culture who knows their language and could point them to "the Way, the Truth and the Life." If hell is a reality, multitudes of people are eternally in trouble.

Why did I become a Christian? Because it made me feel good? No, because I believed that I would be an ostrich with my head in the sand if I did not. I could relate to Peter when he said to the Lord Jesus, "To whom else can we go, You have the words of eternal life."

And why did I become a missionary? Because I'm the missionary type? No way! But because Christ's way is true. God is not willing that any should perish and neither am I.

PICTURING THE PLAGUE

Somehow it's much easier to think in the physical realm. If your city was suffering an enormous plague that left people lying on the streets dying, and you knew of a warehouse that had the very medicine to save them, how much guidance from God would you need to know what to do? You probably wouldn't need to call a conference to decide why these people got the disease. You probably wouldn't debate whether or not they deserved to die, it's not likely that you would ask yourself if you had "the gift" to distribute the medicine. Can you imagine yourself shrugging your shoulders, musing that "dying probably isn't that bad anyway"? Or can you imagine looking out your window at the people writhing in pain on the streets and calmly conclude that what you saw was "God's problem"?

It's quite obvious that any of us would drop what we were doing, grab a bunch of our friends if possible, head for the warehouse, load up with the medicine, and go to work. It may be simplistically put, but why is it so difficult to transfer the picture into the condition of God's beloved creation, mankind?

Still, when we look around us, most of the "good Christians" we know are not conscious of living in the midst of an inestimable tragedy. Few Bible-believing Christians seem to have integrated the reality of hell into their lifestyle. It hardly seems appropriate to wear a sandwich board in the local shopping center emblazoned with "Turn or Burn!" in fact, it's even difficult to "feel" that our roommate or our neighbor across the street who is such a nice guy is really destined to a Christless eternity. (This, especially, when you suspect that he manifests more of the fruits of the Spirit than you do!)

FOLK CHRISTIANITY

Finally, you may be among those who've never had a satisfactory answer to the constant jeer, "What about all the people who have never seen a missionary and have never heard about Jesus Christ. Surely God can't be sending them to hell." Some years ago, I began to realize that my belief system was based not so much on the Scriptures as on popular notions which I had imbibed from others in my life. What most of us act upon as our basic beliefs is in fact what the anthropologists would call "folk religion." In the United States, Christianity is divided up into countless versions of "folk Christianity."

The belief systems may range from the haughty, sophisticated New England, "Please, I cannot conceive of a religion that believes in hell," to Hollywood's "Somebody up there likes me," to the born-again Jock, who inadvertently becomes a relativist when he says, "Well, for me when I take Jesus into the huddle, things go better."

The issue, though, is not what we feel comfortable with, but what is reality.

HELL'S REALITY DEMANDS BELIEF

So why do I believe in hell? For the same reason I believe in heaven. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who proved that He was indeed the Creator visiting the earth (with full knowledge of reality), confirmed the contemporary Jewish belief that indeed there was life after death, and some would spend it in blessedness, in a place prepared by God for those in right relationship to Himself. But other "you are of your father, the Devil", Christ clearly asserted would live forever separated from God, in a sphere of existence prepared for those who have deserted, either aggressively or passively. They want no part of God interfering with their own will. Hell is an eternal granting of a wish to live without the present pressure or need to worship their Creator.

Is hell then to be our primary motivation in giving our lives in total involvement for the "discipling of the nations"? Perhaps not. The honor of our Lord Jesus Christ is a greater motivation. But if the prospect of bringing glory to God does not propel us toward the great goal of "a church for every people," than THINK about hell!