

XLIX. Timeless Truth for Timely Topics in Biblical Perspective

What Does the Bible Say?

“What Happens When I Die? (Part 4)”

The Final State—The Lake of Fire

Revelation 20:11–15

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We will be looking at Revelation 20 for this study. When I was growing up my mom and dad taught me two prayers. One was a prayer we said at the dinner table that started ‘God is good, God is great...’ and the other prayer I was taught to pray before I went to sleep at night. The one at night went like this; ‘Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.’ Notice that it didn’t say ‘body’ but it said soul. Somebody knew their theology when they were praying that prayer and teaching that prayer. Why would I say this? Let’s look at Revelation 20 and fast forward to the coming of Jesus Christ who sets up the Judgment Seat.

Revelation 20:11–15 says [11] *Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. (In other words, this old heavens and earth, this present heavens and earth will be replaced with a new heavens and a new earth.) [12] And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. [13] And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. [14] Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. [15] And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Here is a picture of the second coming of Christ and the setting up of the Judgment Seat identified as the Great White Throne judgment. In it all of humanity is ushered forth as all of the dead are brought before Him, great and small. They are all standing before Him as Hades, the place of the dead, gives up its dead. Those who are apart from Christ are now judged according to their deeds as they are written in the books but praise God there is another set of books which is one book, one volume. It is called the Book of Life. Everyone in the books will hear the judgment, ‘guilty’ and then the second death, identified in the text as the lake of fire. In other passages this is known as Gehenna, the Valley of Hinnom, which was the trash valley outside of Jerusalem. This was the place where people disposed of their trash and it was burned day and night, never going out. He uses that as a metaphor for hell. Here is the intermediate state, Hades, giving up the dead and those not in the Book of Life are judged and cast into a final state, the lake of fire, the second death. Those in the Book of Life enter into a new heavens and a new earth and that is where we are at in this study and the next one – the final state.

I have been building on this from the last three studies. The first study dealt with the reason there is death. Death is not a part of the cycle of life like those who hold the Darwinian view. There is no death in Genesis 1 and 2. Death doesn’t enter the picture until Genesis 3 because sin is what brings forth death. Death means a radical rending apart, a separation. The Bible reveals three kinds of death that sin has brought in its wages. The wages of sin is death. Death one is physical death and that is the separation of the soul from the body.

Death two is spiritual death. We are born dead in our sins, facing a death penalty, so those who are Christians are walking resurrections where God brought you from death unto life. That is why we say you either born once and die twice or you're born twice and die once. If you are born twice that is your natural birth and your unnatural birth, your supernatural birth where you were born again and the only death you face is the valley of the shadow of death to go into the presence of your God. If you don't know Christ and you have been born once then you face not only a physical death, (not a shadow but the full horror of it) but an eternal death.

What is an eternal death? In the text it is called the lake of fire and this is the third type of death that only unbelievers will face. After this we went to the topic of what happens to us the moment after we die.

As soon as we die, our soul leaves our body and our body goes into the ground and will wait the coming of Christ and the resurrection of the body, but the soul goes to the place of the dead. In the Old Testament it was called Sheol and in the New Testament it is called Hades. This is an intermediate state and not a final state. When you go to this intermediate state you go to either an intermediate torment of Hades or the presence of the Lord. Hebrews 12:22–23 says *[22] But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, [23] and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.* The believer goes immediately into the presence of the Lord awaiting the resurrection of their new body.

The aspect of Hades that the believer goes to has three names for it in the Bible. One is that it is called the heavens or the highest heavens. Two it is known as paradise and thirdly it is known as Abraham's bosom. The believer is immediately present with the Lord but it is only an intermediate state and not the final state. I love to share with people standing by a grave site that 'absent from the body is present with the Lord' but God ain't finished yet, as I like to say. The same God who gave a new birth to their soul and they are born again is going to give a new birth to that body. That body that has now seen corruption is going to be raised incorruptible. Then we'll be fitted both soul and body in a final state in a new heavens and a new earth.

The same thing happens to unbelievers. When they die they go immediately to the intermediate state of torment, just like the rich man did in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. In that intermediate state of torment they await a final state of torment that will be declared from the Judgment Seat that Christ sets up when He comes. In this intermediate state of torment their souls are in torment but their bodies will also be raised and be joined with that soul. It will be an everlasting body for an everlasting torment and judgment in a place called hell, the lake of fire, the valley of Hinnom.

So the one who wrote that prayer many recite at night before bed, was right because we pray the Lord our soul to take when we die because our body is going to be here for a while, but not forever because it will be raised. So our subject for this study is the final state.

It's interesting that the teaching on the doctrine of hell, the presence of the reality of hell and the preaching of God's Word has disappeared in the evangelical church, like a mist on a summer morning. I think the result is that we can't preach the Gospel. What is the Gospel? The Gospel is that I am delivered from sin's penalties and power. How can you preach the Gospel when you don't even tell people the most horrendous and horrific penalty of all of sin? You won't have a great awakening without a revived church. You won't have a revived church in a great awakening until the doctrine of hell is recovered in the preaching of God's Word with tears but with conviction, with compassion but with clarity.

I remember a story of one of the nieces in the royal line who went to hear a sermon by one of the famous bishops in the Church of England. Afterward she was greeting the bishop on the way out and she said to him, "Bishop, do you believe in the doctrine of hell." He kind of coughed and sputtered around a few moments and then said "The Bible talks about hell and there are many who believe in it." "Do you believe in it?" He said "The Church of England has believed in the doctrine of hell." She said "If the Bible says it and the Church confesses it, why didn't you warn us of it today?" Of course the answer is that we're more spiritual than Jesus. Harry, what do you mean by that?

We don't talk about hell because it's just not accepted. We're not more spiritual than Jesus we're just more fearful than Jesus. Jesus wasn't afraid of the crowds but we are. We are afraid if we talk about hell we're going to be dismissed. The way you handle hell is not dismissing it from your conversation but by sharing it with compassion and conviction. In this study we'll go through a number of passages of Scripture and then I'll do a little distillation concerning what the Bible teaches about hell. I have purposely restricted myself to simply what Jesus says about it. Two thirds of what the Bible teaches about hell comes directly from the mouth of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. So I guess if it's spiritual and loving for us not to talk about it then Jesus must not be spiritual or loving because He sure did talk about it. He talked about it with clarity, conviction and compassion. Then He went to the cross and took your hell for you so that you might be delivered from it and there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

Let's start by looking at the Gospel of Matthew. This deserves its own series but for now I'm just going to do the best I can with the little time I have in this study. I want to look first at words from John the Baptist in Matthew 3. Matthew 3:7-12 says [7] *But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! (He calls these false leaders and teachers vipers because of the poison they spread with their words.) Who warned you to flee from **the** wrath to come? [8] Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. [9] And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' (A person is not saved simply because they have a Christian father or mother) for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. [10] Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

[11] *"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. [12] His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."*

The word 'fire' has been used three times here and it's very clear what it means for he is speaking of eternal judgment. He is saying that those who don't have a root in Christ will be manifested by the lack of fruit for Christ. Those trees will be cut down and thrown into the fire. When Jesus comes He'll baptize with the Spirit and fire. His people He will baptize with the Spirit and those who are not His people He will baptize with fire, meaning the judgment of God at a place called the lake of fire. It is not a fire that will ever go out for it is unquenchable. It is a fire that continues to burn while it is governed by the God who so established it. Now let's look at the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.

Matthew 5:21-26 says [21] *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' [22] But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother*

*will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to **the** hell of fire.* (Notice He is not looking at the intermediate torment but He is looking at the final torment.) [23] *So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, [24] leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. [25] Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. [26] Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

So you and I stand under the judgement of God and God's judgment stands over us. We need to be liberated from its accusations. So how do you make friends with the Judge? You come to His Son who took the judgment for you and surrender to Him. Now He uses another word picture for hell – a prison sentence that is irrevocable. So we need to come to the Judge. Now let's look at Matthew 8. For the sake of time I have to be selective on the Scriptures I use in this study but there are many we could look at on this matter.

Matthew 8:5–13 says [5] *When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, [6] "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly." [7] And he said to him, "I will come and heal him." [8] But the centurion replied, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. [9] For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." [10] When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. [11] I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (meaning in the presence of the Lord), [12] while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the **outer darkness**. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." [13] And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you as you have believed." And the servant was healed at that very moment.*

Outer darkness is a tough phrase to translate. This also means they will be cast into darkest darkness. The reason the word outer is used is it is to represent the place where no semblance of light has reached to the darkness. There is no light in it at all. I've only been in one place that might be similar to this. When I was putting my wife through college I used to work for company loading trucks and I worked the third shift. The third shift is at night and we were loading a truck that was going from Charlotte, North Carolina to Rhode Island. Someone came by and didn't realize I was inside the truck loading it and they shut the door and locked it. There was no light whatsoever inside the back of the truck and I think I was getting what they call spatial disorientation. I couldn't tell whether I was up or down until I stumbled on a barrel that I had just put in just to touch for at least I had a point of reference. Here it is outer darkness with no point of reference.

One of the things I was very grateful for when I was converted was that God took away from me a very profane, vulgar, ungodly language. He just took that away in an instant but other sins I have been dealing with for forty plus years now. There were about three of my sins that He just microwaved (nuked) right out of my life but there are still many that are being crockpotted. I'm absolutely amazed that the same tongue that language used to come from now gets to teach the Bible. One of the things I used to say so glibly was 'yeah, I'm headed to hell, why not for that's where I'll spend the time with the friends I have.' There is so much wrong with that statement.

Here is one thing wrong with that statement. You won't spend time with anyone in hell. In the final state, it is absolute isolation. If there was another person there made in the image of God that would be some light but there is no light. Spatial disorientation and isolation will be the everlasting existence there.

Jesus also told us something else about hell in this Matthew 8 passage and that is that there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth done by all those who are there. Some people hear that and think 'look at all the remorse.' I think there will be a sense of remorse but that is not what the text is saying. Weeping and gnashing of teeth is like a colloquial phrase from the first century Hebrew and life view. That phrase is translated basically as a temper tantrum. People won't be sorry that they are cast into hell.

I want to tell you how deep our sin nature is. Our sin nature is so deep that when God in righteousness brings the final judgment upon humanity there will be the temper tantrum against God – weeping and gnashing of teeth. Do you remember what they did when Stephen was stoned? They gnashed their teeth upon him. They bit him. That is what this is referring to. It's not a statement of repentance and remorse. At the judgment they will bow their knee to Christ because they are coerced to. The Bible doesn't say anything about people walking into hell. It says they have to be thrown or cast into hell. As they are cast into hell, what they don't want doesn't bring repentance it brings another outburst of rebellion and that's how deep our sin nature is.

Today if you're a Christian that sin nature, that will be so evident upon the unconverted as they are cast into hell with a temper tantrum crying out against the God of glory, which you were born with but you were born again. God ripped that heart and nature out of you. He gave you a new heart and you're a new creation in Christ. He brought that to you because of what you would have brought to Him is the rebellion of sin and the temper tantrum of rebellion. That is how much God has loved you. Now we're told there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth against God in that place but now I want to look at Matthew 23.

In Matthew 23 Jesus is pronouncing the woes upon the Pharisees and Sadducees. Matthew 23:13–15 says [13] *“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. [15] Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”* That is what false teaching and leadership does.

Now do you understand why Satan loves to get a hold of our seminaries and put false teachers and preachers with glib language into pulpits? Has anyone ever seen a church commit to liberal theology plant another church? I've never seen them plant another church because they can't reproduce for they are only parasites. From the pulpit they destroy churches and among themselves are false leaders who twist the Scriptures to lead people astray. It is an awesome thing to stand before God at the Judgment Seat with responsibility for our sins but those who stand there that have taken the garbs of Christianity and the pulpits of His churches who have led people to a false gospel, is the very reason James said in James 3:1, [1] *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.* Here in Matthew 23 Jesus says they have made them twice the child of hell as they themselves are.

Further down in Matthew 23 Jesus uses the language of John the Baptist. Matthew 23:33 says [33] *You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?* I really want you to grasp this because I want you to praise God for amazing grace in your

life. When we were born, we were born with a sin record and a sin nature under a death sentence to hell and it's an irrevocable sentence unless Somebody takes that hell for us. The God of the Judge of all glory sent His Son to the cross to take our judgment so that we could have everlasting life.

Ephesians 2:4–10 says [4] **But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, [5] even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—[6] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, [7] so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. [8] For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.**

I Peter 1:3–5 says [3] **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, [4] to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, [5] who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.** God didn't do this because He quit being just but it was because His Son took what was due to us, to give us what we don't deserve, while He drank to the bottom the wrath of God, the judgment of God, the sentence of God, that we might be free to know and love God and spend eternity with Him. That is what He did for us. There is so much here and this is why all the creeds of the church affirm the doctrine of hell. This is why the Word of God brings it to us and that's why Jesus teaches us. Now I'd like to give you some things to distill from this.

One, hell is a place of absolute isolation. There will be no fellowship. You realize the judgment of that because you and I were made for fellowship with God and each other. God says 'it is good' after days one through six in creation and then He says "It's not good for the man to be alone' yet outer darkness and abject absolute isolation is the place of hell.

Secondly, I'll answer the question 'will God be there?' and the answer is yes and no. Yes, hear the Psalmist say in Psalms 139:7–8, [7] *Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? [8] If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!* But while God is there His presence will not be felt by those who are there. That is one of the five reasons I never use the phrase 'hell on earth' because there is no one who has lived and is living on this earth that is not tasting of the felt presence of God to some degree. That will not happen in hell for the isolation will include no felt presence of God. By definition God is omnipresent so I can't flee from His presence but He can remove His felt presence from those who are in hell.

Thirdly, hell is God's hell for He governs it. It is not Satan's realm. That is Satan's end. It is God who casts death, Hades, Satan, the fallen angels and all who aren't written in the Book of Life. It is God who is sovereign over hell.

Fourthly, hell is a place of torment. I have been asked if the lake of fire is a literally lake of fire or if it is symbolism. I believe He is using the language to most grab your attention and sensibilities as to the horror of hell and therefore He calls it the lake of fire or the valley of fire, Hinnom. When the Bible is talking about crystal seas or pearly gates I think it is metaphors to try and tell us how glorious the new heavens and new earth will be but I believe they are metaphors. By definition metaphors and symbols are falling short of the reality. So if fire is literal and not symbolic that doesn't give you any comfort. It just means He has reached for

what He can communicate in terms of the sensibilities of the torment of hell and if it is symbolic then it will be more horrific than the thing itself. The point is it will be unbearable torment that will be born.

Fifthly, hell will be unbearable torment and isolation that will be forever. It is the eternal lake of fire. It is everlasting. You don't just get thrown there and you burn up and it's done. One, you have been given a resurrected body that cannot perish. Two, the same word used to describe the dwelling of hell is used to describe the dwelling in the presence of God and that is eternal. I will eternally be in the presence of God while the unbeliever will be eternally in the place of hell.

Sixthly, if I could build on eternal then that means the sentence is irrevocable. There is not another day of grace after death. [27] *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment* (Hebrews 9:27). Therefore this eternal sentence cannot be given clemency and there is no evidence that it would.

Seventhly, is then that it is irremediable. There is no remedy for it. The cure for it has been given now but then there is no remedy. Today is the day of salvation.

Finally, it is a death that is unending. As a pastor I want to share with you something that I experience all the time. There are times where I will go to see your relatives on their death bed upon your request who don't know the Lord and I'll stay until they take their last breath. Then I will hear someone say one of two things. One is 'oh I'm so glad it's over for him' and my heart breaks hearing that because nobody has warned them. It is not over for them. Or I will hear 'I'm so glad they are out of their anguish, agony and sorrow' and my heart breaks because I know agony and sorrow has just begun.

This reminds me of the story of C.S. Lewis and his brother who went to a funeral of one of the men Lewis used to debate at Oxford who was an atheist. His brother looked at the casket that was still open and there he was laid out in his burial suit. His brother said to Lewis, "Oh my goodness, the atheist is all dressed up and he has no place to go." Lewis said, "Oh I can promise you that he wishes right now that were so." He did have a place to go. Dare I say in this day of profane language such declarations of using the word hell to punctuate language or tell people to go there, is an abomination to any Christian that would ever utter it. We must teach it and we must share it but we do not glibly refer to it nor do we use it to punctuate language. We will communicate. We will pray and we will encourage people to escape the wrath to come but we will not assume that we are the governors of hell that can send people to it.

I want to mention one more thing about hell from one more text of Scripture. Let's look at Luke 12. Luke 12:41–48 says [41] *Peter said, "Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?"* [42] *And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time?"* [43] *Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.* [44] *Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions.* (the anticipation of the new heavens and the new earth) [45] *But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk,* [46] *the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful.* (that means the judgments of hell) [47] *And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating.* [48] *But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.*

What is that telling you about hell? It is telling you that hell is a place that is irrevocable, absolute torment and isolation, irremediable and everlasting but there are degrees of punishment in hell. In our next study we'll look at the new heavens and the new earth which will be a place of perfect joy but there will also be rewards that are given and we'll try to understand that in the next study. The flip side of hell is that it is one thing to stand in rebellion against God in a nation that does not have Gospel preaching and you sin against general revelation and the guilt of general revelation holds you accountable. It is quite another thing to fall in the presence of God, having sat under pulpits that have pleaded with you to come to Christ and you've known of God's provision, love and grace but you have said 'no.' To whom much is given, much is required. All in hell are in perfect torment and judgment but the perfections of that hell and torment will be directly related in the degrees of punishment, directly related to the knowledge people have had of God's grace, mercy and kindness.

Aren't you glad that Jesus is not as spiritual as are? We are silent on hell because we're spiritual and compassionate. Aren't you glad that Jesus is not silent? He tells us of the wrath to come and warns us to flee it by coming to Him who is our Refuge. Aren't you glad the Bible is not silent about it? We must cease being silent. We must never be arrogant or obnoxious with it but the answer is not silence. There is coming a day that everyone will face and that day will be the last tomorrow. Man knows not his time and that is why the Bible says today is the day of salvation (II Corinthians 6:2).

Do you know of the millions that have slipped into hell while you have been reading this? This hell that is necessary for God's glory, holiness and justice is not necessary for you. You may flee it by coming to Him who has already taken it for you and in Him is everlasting life. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, how many have slipped into eternity in this hour and the silence of God's people of refraining from preaching the whole counsel of God has allowed them to come face to face with something they should have been warned of. Oh in their conscience they already know that they are accountable and that they have to answer but our Savior gave us great clarity by revealing that final state. I thank You Father that Jesus didn't just simply give us references to the intermediate state but He has given us clarity of the ultimate state and the final state that we would flee that hell to Him who has made a Way for us, Jesus Christ. As we have looked at this matter ever so briefly in this study, I am so grateful to You to know the depth of Jesus' cry on the cross, 'My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken Me?' I am grateful to You to know the glory of His next word 'It is finished' and today we can be with Him in glory, the One who has gone away to prepare a new place for us, having rescued us from the place of perishing, Jesus for I pray in His Name, Amen.