

THE ETERNAL FATE OF UNBELIEVERS

The following paper has been excerpted and adapted from Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment by Robert A. Peterson (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing), 1995. Used by permission. Extract by Garry J. Moes.

Introduction

There is a day of great unforeseen catastrophe in store for men and women who die without Christ. Little do they imagine the horror that awaits them. Though the church has traditionally taught that the fate of the lost is eternal punishment, fewer and fewer people are willing to think seriously about that dreadful prospect. Can the future of unbelievers really be that bad? Today a growing number of scholars are answering no.

As theories of the afterlife multiply, so does confusion among pastors on this most important topic. Like misguided pilots, many pastors are leading their flocks to untold destruction. There parishioners, like trusting passengers, rest in a false assurance that their souls are being guided safely around all spiritual harm. Neither they nor their loved ones realize how far off course they have drifted, and that what lies ahead is a fate worse than physical death.

Confusion about the afterlife--is there anything more tragic? What are the competing views about the destiny of the wicked, and how do they measure up to Scripture? As scholars challenge historic teaching on hell, how solid is the biblical evidence for eternal punishment? And what difference should that biblical teaching make in our lives? Those are the concerns of this paper. In order to understand and then respond to the current confusion over the fate of the unsaved, we need first to set forth clearly the leading views in the debate today:

Life After Death Is Unlikely.

Everyone Goes to Heaven.

Unbelievers Get a Chance After Death.

Unbelievers are Ultimately Destroyed.

Unbelievers Suffer Eternally in Hell.

Let us examine each of these views in turn.

Life After Death Is Unlikely

British philosopher, mathematician, and social reformer Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) was an agnostic. Although he regarded it as impossible to know for certain what happens after death, he thought it likely that death was the end of existence. Belief in immortality, he thought, is rooted in fear.

According to Russell one of the gains of modern science is the dispelling of religious myths, such as heaven and hell. The realm of life after death was described as *nowhere*. Russell reserved his strongest words for the biblical doctrine of hell. He faulted Jesus for teaching this doctrine and blamed him for the untold cruelty it has caused in history.

There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. Christ certainly as depicted in the Gospels did believe in everlasting punishment, and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to His preaching -- an attitude which is not uncommon with preachers, but which does somewhat detract from superlative excellence.... I really do not think that a person with a proper degree of kindness in his nature would have put fears and terrors of that sort into the world.... I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture; and the Christ of the Gospels, if you take Him as His chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that.

Everyone Goes to Heaven: Universalism

John Hick (1922-), a world-famous British philosopher of religion, rejects the evangelical theology he once accepted, and shows particular contempt for the traditional doctrine of hell. Indeed, he labels the idea that God inflicts sinners with unending torment a "grim fantasy," and "a serious perversion of the Christian Gospel." Furthermore, he finds eternal punishment "morally revolting" because it attributes "to God an unappeasable vindictiveness and insatiable cruelty." Two forces combined to lead Hicks away from this former evangelical convictions: the study of philosophy, and involvement with people of other faiths.

In *Evil and the God of Love* (1966), Hick argued that God ordered a world that contains real evil as a means of achieving His ultimate goal. This goal was "the creation of the infinite good of a Kingdom of Heaven within which His creature will have come as perfected persons to love and serve Him." Moreover, God would lead *all people* to this ultimate perfection through a process involving their free response. By 1966, therefore, Hick espoused universalism, the belief that in the end all human beings will be saved. Of course, in so doing, he rejected the historic Christian doctrine of hell. He concluded that holding to eternal condemnation only compounds the problem of evil: "Misery which is eternal and therefore infinite would constitute the largest part of the problem of evil." Furthermore, endless punishment is incompatible with Jesus' message of love. In addition, if the traditional view of hell is accepted, it makes the eternal sufferings of the damned in hell pointless, because these sufferings are not constructive.

In recent years, Hick has turned his attention to the world's religions. He has contemplated the claims of these various religions to be based upon revelations from God and asked, "If what Christianity says it true, must not what all the other world religions say be in varying degrees false?" Moreover, this would mean that the majority of the human race is lost, since they don't believe in Jesus. Such a conclusion is unthinkable for Hick, since he already has decided that God will ultimately save everyone.

As a result of his many contacts with people of other religions, Hick has become one of the prime exponents of religious pluralism, the view that all religions lead to God. Indeed, Hick insists that God is one, although he is called by many names. He has called for a "shift from a Christianity-centered or Jesus-centered to a God-centered model of the universe of faiths."

Hick does not sidestep the implications of his pluralism for the doctrine of Christ. However, he rejects the orthodox Christian faith, and concluded that Jesus' claim to be God incarnate and the sole point of saving contact between God and man to be without adequate historical foundation. Many evangelicals are surprised to learn that the majority of Christendom's clergy today are hopeful universalists. These pastors do not dogmatically assert universalism, as Hick does, but are nevertheless hopeful that all will be saved.

Unbelievers Get a Chance After Death: Postmortem Evangelism

Clark Pinnock (1937-) is a leading evangelical theologian who teaches theology at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario. By 1987, he had rejected the traditional view of hell. In its place, Pinnock put the doctrine of the annihilation of the wicked. "The 'fire' of God's judgment consumes the lost. According to this understanding, God does not raise the wicked in order to torture them consciously forever, but rather to declare his judgment upon the wicked and to condemn them to extinction, which is the second death (Rev. 20:11-15).

Recently, Pinnock has come out in favor of what he calls "postmortem" encounter." This is a corollary of his view that God desires to save every person, which in turn is the foundation of his theology of world religions. "A *fundamental point* in this theology of religions is the conviction that God's redemptive work in Jesus Christ was intended to benefit the whole world. ... For according to the Gospel of Christ, the outcome of salvation will be large and generous." Pinnock blames Reformed theology for obscuring God's love, thereby creating a pessimism with regard to the salvation of all people.

The logic behind a postmortem encounter with Christ is simple enough. It rests on the insight that God, since he loves humanity, would not send anyone to hell without first ascertaining what their response would have been to his grace. Since everyone eventually dies and comes face to face with the risen Lord, that would seem to be the obvious time to discover their answer to God's call. Pinnock has a ready answer for those who suggest that unbelievers' encounter with God after death may be unpleasant: "God does not cease to be gracious to sinners just because they are no longer living." On this basis he concludes that there will be grace after death for the unevangelized. "Therefore, when humanity [after death] stands before God, they stand before a God of mercy and love."

Pinnock is not espousing universalism; some may not get a chance after death, such as those who heard the gospel and declined the offer of salvation. Others may get an opportunity and not avail themselves of it due to a lack of desire to do so.

In summary, Pinnock's position is that the church has erred in teaching that death is a cutoff point for grace and that everlasting punishment is the destiny of the unrepentant. One the contrary, Pinnock assures us, "If God really loves the whole world and desires everyone to be saved, it follows logically that everyone must have access to salvation." Those who do not have sufficient access in this life will have it in the next. And if they then reject God's grace, their fate is extermination, not eternal condemnation.

So far, the idea of God's giving people a chance after death has not become popular in evangelical circles.

Unbelievers are Ultimately Destroyed: Annihilationism

John Stott (1921-), a former rector of All Souls Church in London, is recognized as a champion of evangelical Christianity. His preaching, teaching, evangelism, and writing for the cause of Christ have received deserved acclaim. Stott stunned the evangelical world when he tentatively defended the doctrine of annihilation of the wicked.

Conceding that everlasting suffering is the traditional view of the Christian church, Stott has lamented, "Emotionally, I find the concept intolerable." Bowing to Scripture's authority over emotion, Stott finds four biblical arguments in favor of annihilationism:

- Language. "The vocabulary of 'destruction' is often used in relation to the final state of perdition. ... If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, the extinction of being."
- The scriptural imagery depicting hell, especially that of fire. "We associate fire with torment because we have all felt the pain of being burned. Unfortunately, this has caused us to misread the Bible. The main function of fire is not to cause pain, but to secure destruction, as all the world's incinerators bear witness. Hence the biblical expression 'a consuming fire' and John the Baptist's picture of the Judge 'burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.' The fire itself is termed 'eternal' and 'unquenchable', but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible."
- The biblical concept of justice. Scripture declares that God will judge people according to their deeds, "which implies that the penalty inflicted will be commensurate with the evil done." To Stott's thinking, everlasting condemnation does not square with this principle. "Would there not, then, be a serious disproportion between sins consciously committed in time and torment consciously experienced throughout eternity?"
- The biblical concept of God's final victory over evil. Stott finds it difficult to reconcile eternal torment with passages speaking of God uniting all things under Christ's headship and reconciling all things to Himself through Christ. "These texts ... lead me to ask how God can in any meaningful sense be called 'everything to everybody' (1 Cor. 15:28) while an unspecified number of people still continue in rebellion against him and under his judgment. It would be easier to hold together the awful reality of hell and the universal reign of God if hell means destruction and the impenitent are no more."

Unbelievers Suffer Eternally in Hell: Orthodoxy

The four views we have introduced thus far have one thing in common--they all are alternatives to traditional orthodoxy. Their proponents reject the historical view of the church as being too harsh. Not all evangelicals do so, however. One who is knowledgeable of the previous views but nevertheless finds their arguments unconvincing is J.I. Packer (1926-), a British theologian who teaches as Regent College in Vancouver.

Although he admits to a certain attraction to universalism, Packer rejects it as "wishful thinking" and instead accepts the Bible's teaching that not all of mankind will be saved.

No evangelical, I think, need hesitate to admit that in his heart of hearts he would like universalism to be true. Who can take pleasure in the thought of people being eternally lost? If you want to see folk damned, there is something wrong with you! Universalism is thus a comfortable doctrine in a way that alternatives are not. But wishful thinking, based on a craving for comfort and a reluctance to believe that some of God's truth might be tragic, is not sure index of reality. Packer sees no escape from the fact that it is Jesus, the Savior of the world, who is chiefly responsible for the doctrine of eternal condemnation.

THE WITNESS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Jesus spoke directly and plainly about eternal life. In addition, He brought clearer teaching on the fate of the wicked than that found in the Old Testament. We might say, therefore, that Christ Jesus also brought death and hell to light through the gospel.

I find at least three perspectives helpful in summarizing the Old Testament's view of the fate of the ungodly:

- Primary Judgment Passages.
- Passages Concerning Sheol.
- Passages Suggesting Eternal Punishment.

Primary Judgment Passages

The Israelites preoccupation was not with life after death; it was with loving and obeying the Lord in this life. This earthly outlook is evident in the Old Testament passages depicting the major judgments of God on rebellious people. The text describing the Fall in Eden does not speak of life after death. Nor do the other Old Testament judgments, among the most important of which are the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Egyptian plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea, and the captivities of Israel.

The Flood

Three things stand out in the Flood account. First, we see that God is holy and He punishes sin. He responded to human wickedness by pouring out his wrath on the earth. Second, the punishment consisted of sudden physical death; there is no mention of life after death. Third, the Flood narrative exhibits a wide variety of vocabulary. The wicked "perish, die," are "put to an end, destroyed, wiped out, cut off"--all of which signifies a temporal, earthly judgment.

The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah

The same observations made about the Flood apply here: God in His justice punishes sin, and the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah was the cataclysmic loss of human life.

The Plagues of Egypt and the Crossing of the Red Sea

God's temporal punishment of Egypt in the final plague and in the Red Sea similarly proclaims His holiness, His anger against sinners, and His power and majesty. The form that this punishment takes is the immediate loss of the Egyptians' lives at God's hand. Again, the text says nothing about life after death.

The Assyrian and Babylonian Captivities of Israel

The same themes resonate in these biblical accounts: God in His righteousness punished His people's sins with physical death. It is true that this time not all of the Israelites died immediately; thousands were taken into captivity. Nevertheless, few of them returned from captivity. Instead, the vast majority died in exile as punishment for their sins.

Conclusion

This probe of some of the primary Old Testament judgment passages yields valuable clues to God's disposition toward the wicked. First, it confronts us with a biblical picture of God that seems out-of-step with our contemporary world--God is not only loving and kind, but also holy and just. After warning sinners of the consequences of despising His love, He punishes them if they continue to rebel against Him.

Our review of the Old Testament judgment texts bears a second dividend. We find that the punishments described in them are consistently earthly and temporal, resulting in physical death. These passages do not speak of life after death or eternal destinies. However, since these passages do not speak of judgment after death, they do not teach annihilationism and therefore pose no threat to the orthodox view of eternal punishment.

Passages Concerning Sheol

Bible translations of the Hebrew word *sheol* reflect different understandings of the word: grave, hell, pit. If *sheol* only refers to the grave, then our conclusions are similar to those reached from our study of the judgment passages: the concern of the Old Testament is largely earthly and temporal. The negative connotations often associated with *sheol* reflect the fact that death is a punishment for sin. But *sheol* tells us nothing about life after death.

According to the predominant evangelical view, however, *sheol* sometimes refers to a netherworld to which both godly and ungodly go at death. The Bible uses characteristics associated with the

grave to describe this underworld: depth, darkness, silence, and dust. If this view is correct, then *sheol* forms a bridge between the judgment passages and the passages suggesting the eternal punishment of the wicked. *Sheol* speaks of life after death in vague terms. It moves beyond the judgment passages in affirming that there is life after death for the wicked, but it does not approach the clarity we find in the New Testament concerning their fate.

Passages Suggesting Eternal Punishment

Isaiah 66:22-24

God displays His glory by judging the wicked, but more so by spreading His fame among the countries. Here in the language of the old dispensation is a prediction of the worldwide worship of God so characteristic of the new. People from every nation will fulfill the supreme purpose of human existence--to worship and enjoy God forever. Not everyone will do so, however. Instead, the ungodly will suffer a terrible fate. The prophet, using battlefield imagery, pictured those slain by the divine warrior. Having rebelled against the living God, they will suffer the horrifying consequences: *undying worm and inextinguishable fire*.

The prophet used imagery from the present world to describe the future order. For exposes corpses to be eaten by worms or burned was a disgrace. Here was the ultimate disgrace. In all other cases, the maggots would die when they had finished their foul work, and the fire would go out once its fuel was consumed. But in the prophet's picture of God's judgment of those who rebel, the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched! The punishment and shame of the wicked have no end; their fate is eternal.

Isaiah here does not give us (as the Old Testament does) a developed doctrine of hell. He doesn't speak of the resurrection of the dead, or of the Last Judgment. Instead, he uses earthly imagery to point to the final doom of the wicked. He gives us "an early description of eternal punishment: though dead, the rebels will continue to suffer for ever."

Daniel 12:1-2

The prophet uses language from everyday activities of this life--awakening those who sleep--to depict the bodily resurrection of the last day. The resurrected will be divided into two groups that will experience different fates: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. This passage contrasts the destinies of the righteous and the wicked. The word "everlasting" (*olam*) is used to describe the fates of the just and unjust.

The word deserves careful study, as it does not always mean "everlasting." It is an adjective signifying long duration with limits set by the context. In Daniel 12:2 this word is used of the destinies of both the righteous and the wicked. It is difficult to limit either of these destinies; they are both "everlasting." As we will see when we study the New Testament, the state of affairs after the resurrection of the dead is characterized by the life of God Himself; the age to come lasts as long as He does--forever. So we see that even though *olam* does not always mean "eternal," the context here indicates that it must. The wicked will find no escape from the God who defends His people. The enemies of God will suffer a terrible fate: they will be raised to eternal disgrace.

THE WITNESS OF THE REDEEMER (1): ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

Hell is Real

Matthew 5:21-22

Jesus warns that if Israel's leaders persist in their hypocrisy, they have more to fear than the local courts and even the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court. Above all, they should fear the living God! In fact, they are "in danger of the fire of hell." According to Jesus, hell is real.

The word Jesus here uses for hell is *gehenna*--meaning, "Valley of Hinnon." In this valley human sacrifices were offered to Molech. It had an evil reputation.

Here, then, is a ready-made designation for hell. When Jesus warns of "gehenna," His hearers understand that he speaks figuratively of the fate of the wicked. The "fire of gehenna" means terrible suffering at the hands of almighty God. It is the opposite of entering the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:20).

Matthew 5:27-30

Jesus speaks figuratively when He commands gouging out eyes and cutting off hands; he is not teaching that His hearers should mutilate their bodies. Rather, Jesus warns His hearers to restrict themselves, to perform radical spiritual "surgery," rather than yield to their sinful desires. The reason? Because the Savior loves sinners and wants them to avoid the terrible realities of hell.

Matthew 23:15,33

God tolerates only so much sin, and the, when the measure is full, He responds in wrath. The irony is that this Old Testament idea, common in the intertestamental literature, had never before been applied to Israel. Now the leaders of the covenant nation are outstripping the Gentiles in provoking God to anger! Because of such sin, Jesus warns, the Pharisees and teachers of the law will not escape the condemnation of hell. How pathetic! The leaders of God's people are heading for hell and taking their converts with them!

Conclusion

Jesus Christ taught that hell is real. All who die unforgiven will experience God's awful judgment in hell. It simply is not true that ultimately all will belong to the kingdom of heaven. Many people, even religious people, will be "thrown into hell" by almighty God.

In light of Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees' and teachers' hypocrisy, an examination of our hearts is in order. Do we sincerely trust Christ as Lord and Savior? Or are we frauds like many of the religious leaders of the Israel of old? We must not take these questions lightly. Hell is as real as the rule of almighty God.

Hell is Ruled by God

Matthew 10:28

Taken by themselves, this verse and similar ones that speak of "destruction" are compatible with annihilationism, the teaching that God will blot the wicked out of existence. In the light of all of Scripture's teaching, however, it is clear that the "destruction" spoken of here is God's punishment of the ungodly with forfeiture of all that is worthwhile in human existence.

That Jesus is not speaking here of literal annihilation is corroborated by a similar passage in Luke. In Luke 12:5, Jesus warns: "Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell." The destruction mentioned in Matthew 10:28, therefore, is equivalent to being thrown into hell.

Moreover, when Jesus warns his disciples to "be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul *and* body in hell," he implies that there will be a resurrection of the dead. God will raise the wicked from the dead to experience the ruin of their whole persons. It is not wonder that, as the ruler of hell, God is to be revered.

Matthew 25:41,46

As a result of the separation of the "sheep" from the "goats," people will experience one of two contrasting fates: God's blessing or His wrath.

Instead of inheriting the kingdom of heaven, the wicked will enter eternal fire. The fire was originally prepared for the punishment of the Devil and his evil angels. How tragic that human beings also rebelled against God and share their lot!

Annihilationists insist that Jesus here speaks of the obliteration of the wicked by fire. That interpretation is erroneous, however, as a comparison of Matthew 25:41 with Revelation 20:10 makes clear. There John describes the condemnation of the Devil: "The devil ... was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur." He also explains what this means for Satan: he "will be tormented day and night for ever and ever." John's words are unambiguous. The Devil's being cast into eternal fire means that he will be perpetually tormented. When Jesus, therefore, says that wicked human beings will share the Devil's fate, he means that they too will suffer eternal torment.

Jesus' final words in Matthew 25 lead to the same conclusion: "Then they [the wicked] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Conclusion

God rules over everything, including heaven and hell. The popular idea that hell is Satan's kingdom over which he rules is proved false by the passage we just studied. Jesus described the destiny of wicked humans as "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). Instead of reigning over hell, Satan will suffer the worst punishment there.

Moreover, Jesus taught that we are not to fear human beings, but rather God, "who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). In fact, since God is Lord over all, He alone "is able to save and destroy" (James 4:12). Jesus, therefore, tells us to reverence God alone. Oh, that modern men and women would fear the living God, repent of their sins, and turn to him for forgiveness! Tragically, those who do not will be rejected by their Maker forever.

Hell Involves Rejection

Matthew 7:23

On Judgment Day, many will fervently but falsely claim to belong to Jesus. Jesus repudiates the false disciples' claim that they know Him as Lord. In addition, He disowns them by denying that He ever entered into a personal relationship with them. Their claim to know Him, therefore, is invalid. Finally, He exiles the wicked from His blissful presence.

What Jesus accepts as evidence of salvation is true faith showing itself in obedience to the Father's will.

Matthew 8:11-12

Jesus' meaning is unmistakable. If sitting at the feast means belonging to God and enjoying His presence, then being excluded from the banquet means being rejected by God and cut off from His blessed presence. It is to go from the light of the feast "outside into the darkness" (see also Matt. 22:13). When Jesus adds, "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 12), He is describing hell as a place of terrible sorrow, extreme suffering and remorse.

Matthew 25:30

These words of condemnation to the wicked, lazy servant are reminiscent of Matthew 8:12 and 22:13. They indicate that God rejects those who are unfaithful to Him. Such people are excluded from the joy of God's gracious presence. Instead, they go "into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." This is one of five times in Matthew's gospel that Jesus speaks of the damned in hell crying and grinding their teeth in pain.

Conclusion

Such horrible pictures of suffering shock our sensibilities. Upon reflection, however, we realize that the Redeemer paints such pictures out of kindness. By announcing the fate of the wicked before the Last Judgment, He affords them opportunity to escape that fate. In fact, all who heed His warnings, repent, and cast themselves upon His mercy will be delivered from hell.

It is the same Lord Jesus who dies and rises again to save sinners who tells them plainly what their sins deserve. Jesus' preaching about hell, therefore, is part of His gracious ministry to a lost world. It is His way of showing unbelievers their need of Him. They, in turn, inevitably make one of two responses. Some display ingratitude for His warnings and reject Him. Others, however, gratefully own Him as the One who alone can rescue them. Instead of experiencing the wrath their sins deserve, they will taste the sweet victory won by His death and resurrection.

Hell Involves Pain

Matthew 13:30, 40-43

Here, as in Matthew 5:22, Jesus employs fire imagery to describe hell. What does hell-fire signify? Consumption of the wicked, as annihilationists claim? If that is what Jesus wants to teach, here is an excellent opportunity to do so. All He has to do is say, "They will throw them into the fiery furnace, *and they will be no more.*" But Jesus never says that. Instead, when He interprets the burning of the weeds, He speaks of pain, not consumption: "They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 13:42).

The doom of the ungodly, "the fiery furnace" of hell, therefore, will be a place of great sorrow and suffering.

Matthew 13:49-50

Jesus equates fishermen with angels, and the time of harvesting fish with the end of the age: the good fish are the righteous and the bad fish are the wicked. The destiny of the ungodly, as in the parable of the weeds, is the fiery furnace. Here again, by speaking of crying and grinding of teeth, Jesus describes hell as a place of untold grief and agony.

Matthew 18:6-9

Jesus uses the image of a person being drowned to depict God's punishment of sinners. Jesus graphically portrays a huge millstone, the kind pulled by a donkey, being hung about someone's neck and that person being drowned in the Sea.

Our Lord contrasts entering life with being thrown into "the fire of hell," even "eternal fire" (Matt. 18:8-9). Here are opposite destinies. The righteous will enter eternal life in God's joyous presence. The unrighteous, however, will be cast by God into hell. Jesus paints a picture of hell-fire to warn His listeners of the pain of God's judgment. When He speaks of "eternal fire," He means that the torments of hell will have no end. Once more, then, the Savior compassionately warns His hearers of the dread of eternal punishment at the hands of almighty God.

Matthew 24:51

God will reward the faithful servant with greater responsibility, but He will punish the unfaithful one. Specifically, "he will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites." Both Testaments speak of being cut in pieces as a severe punishment.

The wicked servant is allotted "a place with the hypocrites where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 24:51). He will join other false believers in the place of torment and regret--hell.

Our Lord hereby bestows great significance upon this life, for in it decisions are made that have momentous consequences. There will be no opportunity for salvation after His return.

Conclusion

Jesus often and undeniably depicted hell as involving terrible pain and suffering. At the end of both the parable of the weeds and the parable of the net, He speaks of unbelievers' being thrown into a fiery furnace. In Matthew 18:6-9 He warns His hearers of a fate worse than being drowned in the depths of the sea with a large millstone hung around one's neck. In the same passage, He threatens unbelievers with "eternal fire," even "the fire of hell" (Matt. 18:6-9). Finally, at the conclusion of the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants, he speaks of human beings' being cut to pieces (Matt. 24:51).

Conclusion

Jesus Christ says more about the fate of the wicked than anyone else in the Bible. The twelve passages that we have studied from Matthew's gospel introduce us to Jesus' teaching. Despite the protests of many, hell is real. Contrary to popular opinion, God alone rules over hell. The wicked face a dreadful fate--rejection by their Creator and eternal pain!

Jesus speaks frequently of hell because He is the Savior of the world. He warns of unspeakable torment in order to move His hearers to flee from the wrath to come. We who name His name should not shrink from following His good example. We must tell people the truth: without Jesus as Lord and Savior they are headed for the eternal judgment of God.