Is It Real?

"And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Matthew 25:46, ESV

Is it real?

Hell is not a pleasant subject. It is difficult to contemplate eternal punishment, and there should be no pleasure in considering the suffering of those who remain under the judgment of God. Yet whether hell is pleasant to contemplate has nothing to do with whether hell is real.

Jesus said that it is.

A Barna Group survey found that 71 percent of American adults believed that hell exists. Yet only 32 percent described hell as an actual place of torment and suffering. Those numbers raise another question. How many who say they believe in hell believe in the hell Jesus actually described?

Jesus spoke of the "hell of fire" (Matthew 5:22). He spoke of "outer darkness" accompanied by "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12). He warned of the One who can "destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). That destruction does not mean cessation of existence, but irreversible ruin under divine judgment. Jesus spoke of a place "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). And He spoke unmistakably of "eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:46).

Whether every description is understood literally or whether some are understood as imagery does not remove the reality being described. If the fire is figurative, what reality is so terrible that Christ chose unquenchable fire to describe it?

Perhaps the deeper question is not whether hell is real, but whether Jesus told the truth.

Christians confess that Scripture is the Word of God. They confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. If those confessions are true, His teaching concerning hell cannot simply be ignored because modern ears find it offensive.

Yet a doctrine does not have to be formally denied to disappear from the church. Sometimes Christians simply stop talking about it.

When was the last time a sermon was heard concerning hell? When was the last time Christians spoke seriously about eternal punishment? Hell may remain in statements of faith while becoming strangely absent from preaching, conversation, and even evangelism.

But removing hell also changes the urgency of the gospel.

The gospel is far more than an escape from punishment. In Christ there is forgiveness, justification, reconciliation, adoption, eternal life, and fellowship with God. Yet Scripture also says that those justified by Christ's blood "shall be saved by him from the wrath of God" (Romans 5:9).

Saved from what?

From the righteous judgment of a holy God.

Hell is not an embarrassment to God's justice. It is an expression of it. Fallen men are not innocent victims receiving an undeserved punishment. Scripture describes them as sinners and enemies of God. God would remain perfectly righteous if He judged every sinner according to his sin.

The wonder is that He saves any.

God says that He takes "no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezekiel 33:11). Neither should Christians take pleasure in contemplating hell. But compassion cannot require denying what Christ taught. Quite the opposite. If hell is real, compassion requires warning those who are headed toward judgment and telling them of the Savior who saves sinners from it.

The same Jesus who spoke so plainly about hell went to the cross to save His people from their sins.

Is hell real?

Jesus said it is.

Just a thought.

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