

## REACH|11 (Week 2 of 3)

Reach Them Before It's Too Late: The Role of Hell in our Zeal for Missions

Revelation 20:7-15

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*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. 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 (Rev 20:7-15)*

Our theme, as you can gather from my title, is a heavy one today. We are going to talk about hell and what its reality does for our understanding and passion for missions. My aim is to remind us about something that we all know but something that we don't really feel: hell is real and millions of people are headed there.

This is an important subject to talk about because discussions about Hell often take two extremes. In the first place there are those who claim to be evangelicals who have questioned or even denied the possibility of eternal, irreversible punishment in hell. They see the concept of Hell as an unhelpful hurdle. One contemporary author said, "...history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God." The second extreme is the "hell-fire and brimstone preacher," or the person who walks around the city with a sandwich sign that reads "THE END IS NEAR" screaming at people who are disinterested at best or, worse, turned off.

The effect of this has been a tragic muzzling of one of the most important subjects in the entire Bible. Jesus talked about hell more than all other Biblical authors put together. Paul used eternal judgment as a part of some very important presentations of the gospel (Acts 17:30-31). And historically the reality of hell has motivated great missions efforts. It was Hudson Taylor who inspired England to have a vision to reach China with this tagline: "A million a month dying without God."

This is our second week with a particular focus on Global Missions. During the month of October we take some time to broaden our horizons, expand our vision, and fan into flame our passion to fulfill the Great Commission – to make disciples of all nations.

My message today could be summarized with this singular and simple statement: **Our mission is urgent because hell is real.**

The church of Jesus Christ is on a mission, and it is going somewhere. There is a trajectory of what God is doing in the world, and there will come a day when the church's mission ends. We're going to look at a passage in Revelation that gives us a clear picture of what that final moment looks like, and then I want to help you understand what this does for missions and evangelism.

### **What "The End" Looks Like**

The book of Revelation is filled with lots of fascinating and frightening images and pictures. It is a book whose design is to be both warning and worship. Revelation 1 tells us that the book is about the final victory of Jesus:

*The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place... To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood 6 and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen" (Rev 1:1,5-7).*

The book is clearly about Jesus and the global conquest of his kingdom. The world in which we live is not static, and there is a sense of urgency even in the way that book ends: "He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen" (Rev. 22:20).

In Revelation 20:7-15 we see three important "The End" events.

#### ***A Final Battle (vv 7-10)***

Although we cannot see it, there is a spiritual battle that is being waged on the earth. Our world is a place marred by the effects of sin, and there is an insurgency being led by Satan. At some point in the future, Satan is temporarily bound and limited during a period known as the Millennial Kingdom, a time when Christ rules on the earth for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4-6).

After that season Satan is released, and he unleashes a global attack on the city of God and the followers of Jesus.

*7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. 9 And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city (Rev. 20:7-9).*

This is Satan's final and most visible attempt to overthrow the reign and rule of Christ. He deceives a vast number of people who gather like Gog and Magog, a figure of speech to describe the arch-enemies of the people of God from all over the world.<sup>1</sup> Satan and mankind collude to conquer Christ.

However, God strikes a final and cosmic blow that results in defeat and eternal punishment as Satan joins the beast and the false prophet, the unholy trinity in the tribulation, in the lake of fire: "...but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, 10 and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Rev. 20:9-10). There are two things that I want you to note here:

1. Everything on earth is moving toward a great battle because the presence of sin that infects the earth and its inhabitants is a matter of rebellion when it comes to a holy God. Our world is not innocent. It is fallen, corrupted, and therefore under the promise of future judgment. There are no sinless, judgment-avoiding people on earth. The entire race has become rebellious.
2. There is real place called the lake of fire which has been created as the place of judgment for those who rebel against God's rule. It is a place that is described very clearly as being occupied by real people (19:20, 20:10) and a place that is eternal ("tormented day and night forever").

Now I know that for some of you, this notion of the rebelliousness of the human race and the eternal nature of punishment may seem to be unthinkable with what you believe about a loving God. And my answer to that objection would be to suggest that maybe sin is far worse than what we really understand. Maybe we really don't fully "feel" the weight of God's holiness.

J.I. Packer in his excellent little book called "Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God" gives us great advice in how to think about great mysteries or antinomies in the Bible:

*We ought not, in any case, to be surprised when we find mysteries...in God's Word. For the Creator is incomprehensible to his creatures. A God who we could understand exhaustively, and whose revelation of himself confronted us with no mysteries whatsoever, would be a God in man's image and therefore an imaginary God, not the God of the Bible at all.*<sup>2</sup>

In other words there are some hard things in the Bible that must simply be believed, and the events surrounding "The End" are just that. And there's more than just a battle.

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<sup>1</sup> See Genesis 10:2, Ezekiel 38:2, Ezekiel 38:9

<sup>2</sup> J.I. Packer, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1961), 31-32.

### ***The Great Judgment (vv 11-13)***

There is another very important event connected to the end, and that is the final judgment. Sometimes this is called the Great White Throne judgment because of what we find in verse 11.

*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. 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 (Rev 20:11-13).*

The passage begins with a powerful sense of majesty. The throne is great in size, and it has an impressive appearance. John uses a word that can mean bright or gleaming which in Revelation is used as a sign of heavenly glory, purity, and victory. The image of the Son of Man (1:14), the clothing of Elders around the throne (4:4), the horse of the conqueror (6:2), the robes of the martyrs (6:11), people from every tribe, nation and tongue (7:9), and the army of heaven (19:14) are all described this way. White is the regal and pure color of heaven. This is the day spoken about in Daniel 7:9-10.

*As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. 10 A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.*

Further, the glory of the One seated on the throne (probably Jesus – Acts 10:42) is so great that the entire universe flees but cannot hide. The clear picture here is that “God is in charge and will execute a just sentence about all that has fallen under the control of evil.”<sup>3</sup>

Notice the judgment that follows. Verse twelve tells us that there is no one immune from the judgment. No one is too important and no one is so unimportant such that they would be exempt. All the dead – small and great – must stand before this great moment of judgment. If you look ahead to verse thirteen you will see this repeated. The sea, death, and Hades (the realm of the dead) give up those who are in them. There is no exception.

The act of judgment is connected to “the books.” Verse twelve tells us that “the books were opened.” And it continues by saying “then another book was opened, which is the book of life.” These are different books. In the first case, the books are the record of every evil thought, word, and deed. Every sin every committed is recorded in these books. However, there is another book which was similar to the registry of citizens kept by ancient cities.<sup>4</sup> This is the book of life and it contains the name of every believer (Phil. 4:3, Heb. 12:23).

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Mounce, NICT: The Book of Revelation, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1977), 365.

<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur, Revelation 12-22, (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 2000), 255.

Can you imagine the amount of every sin committed by every person who ever lived? Maybe this thought helps us understand the depth of treason of sin and the justification of eternal punishment. Imagine with me the weight of this moment as the majesty of God is on full display and, at the same time, the overwhelming sinfulness of the human race is now painfully clear. John Phillips captures the moment well:

*The dead, small and great, stand before God. Dead souls are united to dead bodies in a fellowship of horror and despair. Little men and paltry women who lives were filled with pettiness, selfishness, and nasty little sins will be there. Those whose lives amounted to nothing will be there, whose very sins were drab and dowdy, mean, spiteful, peevish, groveling, vulgar, common and cheap. The great will be there, men who sinned with a high hand, with dash, and courage, and flair. Men like Alexander and Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin will be present, men who went in for wickedness on a grand scale with the world as their stage and who died unrepentant at last. Now one and all are arraigned and on their way to be damned: a horrible fellowship congregated for the first and last time.<sup>5</sup>*

This is a sober and fearful moment. And we are told about it not for academic purposes; we are told what the end will be like for the purpose of warning us now. This is the great and final judgment with no second chances. This is the end. But there is more.

### ***An Eternal Punishment (vv 14-15)***

The final battle was incredibly decisive. The great judgment was overwhelmingly final. God has won; sin has been defeated; Satan has been punished; sin has been exposed; judgment has been made. Now comes the punishment. This is the ultimate, eternal end.

Everything that is wrong with a rebellious world is separated from God. Verses fourteen and fifteen give us the ultimate end:

*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 (Rev 20:14-15).*

The lake of fire has been created by a holy God for the purpose of bringing ultimate justice to a rebellious, sin-affected world. Jesus referred to this place with the Greek word gehenna. The word referred to a valley southwest of Jerusalem in the valley of Hinnom which was the location of child sacrifice in the Old Testament and the garbage dump in the New Testament. The constant fires used to burn the garbage gave off a foul-smelling smoke and was infested with maggots.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the Bible refers to this realm as a place of total darkness (Matt. 8:12), banishment from God's kingdom (Matt. 22:13), and a place of unending sorrow (Matt. 13:42). It is a place of fire which is the most common way to describe the torment of hell (used over twenty times in the New

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<sup>5</sup> John Phillips, Exploring Revelation, (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 1987), 242-243

<sup>6</sup> MacArthur, 256.

Testament). Hell is described in grotesque and horrifying terms because it is a grotesque and horrifying place.

Already in the lake of fire is Satan, the beast, and the false prophet (see 20:10), and now God completes his cosmic cleansing. Death and Hades are thrown into it, and they are spoken about as if they are personified. Death is the principle effect of sin in the world and the enemy of the believer (1 Cor. 15:26). Death is the penalty of sin (Rom. 3:23), and it is a constant reminder as to what is wrong with the world. Hades or the grave is the realm of the dead. It is the repository of death's activity. There is no use for Hades with sin and death completely conquered. So it, along with Death, is thrown into the separated realm.

To add a further sense of seriousness to the moment, John adds the words "this is the second death." He says this to indicate that "while there is a second and higher life there is also a second and deeper death. And as after life there is no more death, so after death there is no more life."<sup>7</sup> In other words, this is permanent. There is no second chance. This is the end.

Back to the books. It seems that this passage identifies an accounting of all the sin in the world. Those whose names are written in the book of life have payment for their sin through the death of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> And the tragedy of the moment is when the book of works is read and there is no name found in the book of life. In other words, the payment for sin could have been Christ's death but now it is eternal punishment in hell. The absence of one's name in the book of life means that before God the person stands unforgiven, unholy, guilty, and damned.

The passage ends with a sober and painful conclusion: "*And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire*" (20:15). The person joins Satan, the beast, the false prophet, Death, and Hades in the place of separation from God, a place described only four verses earlier as a place of torment "forever and ever" (20:10).

This is how it all ends. This is the final battle, the great judgment and the eternal punishment. And I believe that we are given this level of detail and insight into what will happen so that we not succumb to the normal tendency to treat the future as if it were uncertain or hell as if it was just a bad dream. God is holy. Sin is dangerous. Hell is real. And people need to know.

## **Hell and Missions**

My purpose today has not been to scare you, but what we have learned about is indeed scary. My greater motivation is to motivate you, to push you, to challenge you with the reality what we are talking about. Let me give you five reasons why hell is important to missions:

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<sup>7</sup> Mounce, 367.

<sup>8</sup> This is likely distinct from the judgment Paul described in 2 Corinthians 5:10 which is usually called the bema seat judgment, an accountability for believers resulting in various degrees of reward. This judgment could take place before or during the Great White Throne.

## **1. God has told us about Hell**

Talking about torment in fire-saturated, God-separated existence that lasts forever is not easy. And there are some who would suggest that evangelism or global missions is not served well by focusing on hell because it makes God seem angry, abusive, or vindictive. We'd rather start with "God has a wonderful plan for your life!" or "God loves you!" And while those are not untrue, they are not the whole story. God has told us about hell for a reason, and it behooves us to be submissive to his Word. Hell is important to missions because Hell is part of what God has told us.

## **2. Hell shows us the danger of sin**

I would suggest to you that those who don't believe in an eternal hell have a low view of the sin and a wrong view of God. Sin is not just some bad things that we do; it is not just the mistakes that we've done. Sin has its rebellion against a holy God, and it has affected the entire human race. Everyone has sinned (Rom. 3:23), no one is righteous (Rom. 3:10), no one understands or seeks for God (Rom. 3:11), and no one does good (Rom. 3:12). But what is worse is that there is no fear of God before our eyes (Rom. 3:18). In other words sin is deceiving and dangerous.

## **3. Hell is a part of the Gospel**

The message about hell is not good news, but it is central to the good news since hell is what Jesus saves us from. Deliverance from condemnation and the forgiveness of our sins is all a part of the gospel message. But so is the fact that Jesus, rather than hell, pays for our sin. Hell is what sin rightly deserves. And if you have been saved from something huge, scary, awful, and eternal it makes the saving act all the more glorious. The dark backdrop of the hell makes the gospel shine even brighter.

## **4. Hell can awaken the conscience**

Part of the enemy's strategy is to keep people blinded to their condition (2 Cor. 4:4), and the reality of eternal punishment in hell can cause a person to seriously think about their life. Paul, when addressing the scholars and philosophers in Athens talked about coming judgment (Acts 17:30-31). Paul did the same thing when he was before Felix such that it caused the governor to be alarmed (Acts 24:25). People need to be loved, persuaded and convinced. But they also need to be warned! Hell is serious.

## **5. Hell creates urgency**

It is this final reason that motivated me to preach on this subject during our spotlight on missions. There are real people who are in serious and eternal danger, people who we know and others who we don't. They are in danger because of the reality of sin and certainty of judgment. And our low view of sin – not really feeling the weight of eternal judgment – causes us to remain silent, uninvolved, or stingy with our money. The reality of hell should eclipse the things that cause us to act as if this isn't real and as if it isn't serious. People in unreached lands who never hear the

message will be condemned unless we reach them. There is no alternative path for salvation; there is no second chance. Sin is serious. Hell is real. Missions is urgent. We've got to care.

Recently I was on a trip with my wife, and we were making our way to our terminal for our flight when we stopped to get some coffee. While standing in line, a woman ran past us toward the bathroom that was just in front of the coffee shop holding her mouth. We knew why she was running, and unfortunately she didn't make it. The ill woman threw up in the middle of terminal. However, it happened very fast and as she ran into the bathroom my wife said, "Mark all of those people walking this way don't see the vomit!" Sure enough. We were one of the few people to see it happen, and there were hundreds of people coming down the terminal. From our coffee shop line we tried to warn them, but it wasn't working. People were walking, running, and slipping right through the vomit. I couldn't stand it.

Our coffee line had cue lines or ropes to steer people toward the register, and I took two of them and moved them on either side of the vomit. Now people would see to walk around, and it was working. That is until the coffee shop workers saw what I did. One of them yelled at me: "You have some nerve! Who do you think you are!" She stormed from behind the counter berating me for my actions. I tried to convince her, "Ma'am, people are going to walk right through that vomit." But she was determined. I stepped back as she shot me an evil eye.

No sooner had she taken her cue line from the vomit area and put it back, a stewardess screamed. She had been hurrying to get to flight and slipped in vomit, landing on her rear end right in the middle of it all and dragging her luggage through it as well. The coffee clerk was nearest to her, and she helped the shocked stewardess up, trying not to get vomit all over her. The stewardess walked on in a daze, and I caught the eye of my accuser.

I had seen the entire thing unfold, and I was outraged. I looked at her and said, "Well, at least you got your rope back!" She turned and said nothing. I wasn't finished. I quietly but firmly said, "You are so selfish." And that is when the other workers chimed in: "We'll get in trouble if we move the ropes", "It is not our responsibility to clean up vomit", and "You are just harassing us." I walked away shaking my head at how incredibly unconcerned and uncaring they had been. It was shocking.

Those rationalizations sound familiar don't they? Not just regarding vomit in a terminal but in regards to how we view evangelism and global missions. "I'll get in trouble." "It's not my responsibility." "You're just harassing us." Oh how often I've heard that when it comes to talking about the reality of hell.

But I hope it hits you differently today. I hope that you see it: Sin is serious. Hell is real. Missions is urgent. You've got to care.

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