

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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HOW SHALL YOU ESCAPE THE SENTENCE OF HELL (1)

Matthew 23:33

One of the sternest words the Lord Jesus ever used to sinners is found in Matthew 23:33: *You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell?* Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees, calling them serpents and the sons of vipers. 'You are the offspring of snakes that cannot escape the damnation of hell!'

There is one topic here that we need to look at, and it concerns the Lord's teaching about hell. This is a heavy topic. Hell is a subject that we do not want to talk casually about.

A God of justice

When we think of hell, immediately several questions come to mind. For example, why should there be a hell at all? Does it really exist? This idea of people burning in the fires of hell seems so harsh. If hell is real, then how can a God of love institute such a place where sinners will suffer perpetually? For those of us who believe in hell, it can be indeed an embarrassing topic to talk about.

The concept of hell is very much linked to the concept of justice. We find in every society a system of justice which deals with our conduct in relation to others. Each society then establishes its own laws. Anyone who is found guilty for violating those laws is punished. The punishment can take several forms, depending on the gravity of the transgression: community work, monetary fine, a brief time in jail, a life sentence to prison, or even capital punishment in some places. Without a judicial system, our society would be chaotic. Can you imagine a country where crimes are not punished for? You can do as much evil as you want, and there is no consequence to you. Nobody can arrest you. That country would be a very dangerous place.

You see that the implementation of justice requires a certain form of punishment. This is true of human justice as well as of divine justice. In the spiritual world, you cannot implement justice without hell. Hell then is the final place of punishment for those who transgress the law of God. God is not only a God of love. He is also a God of justice for righteousness is one of His attributes. Love without justice would be corrupted. It is justice that prevents love from becoming fornication. From becoming adultery. Love without justice is love without a back bone. Justice is the element that makes love strong, healthy, and pure.

Being infinitely righteous, God cannot do otherwise than regard sin as hateful and deserving of punishment. He will not allow evil, as we saw in the previous lesson, to continue indefinitely. He has drawn a line and beyond that line, evil will be stopped. And hell puts an end to evil by eliminating it.

The reality of hell

Is hell real? Why should one believe in hell? My answer is simple. We should believe in hell because Jesus clearly taught its existence. The word 'hell' (*geenna*) occurs 12x in the NT and 11x of these 12x, it occurs in the teaching of the Lord Jesus. 7x in Matthew (5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33); 3x in Mark (9:43; 45, 47); 1x in Luke (12:5). And when we look at His teaching more closely, we realize that Jesus taught more about avoiding hell than He did about going to heaven. So if we accept Jesus' authority, we must believe that hell is real.

Notice also that Jesus talked about hell to non-believers as well as to His disciples. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was teaching His disciples (Matthew 5:1-2). He said in Matthew 5:29, *It is better for you (i.e. My disciples) that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.*

We are surprised because we tend to think that the subject of hell is for unbelievers. We think we can use it to convince a person to believe in the Gospel. We just 'frighten' him a bit into the kingdom of God. I don't see that happening in the Lord's teaching. Jesus does not use hell to scare anybody. When He tells us about hell, He is simply telling the truth, that God's justice will come against our sins if we don't repent. He is trying to tell us that we must choose between life and death. We have only two roads in which to go. And right now, we are walking on one of these roads. Are we going down the road leading to life? Or are we going down the road leading to death? Matthew 7:13-14.

Matthew 7:13. Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.

14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Here Jesus speaks of two final alternatives: life or destruction. And He says, 'Beware of the broad road, of the easy road, because it leads to destruction.' The word 'destruction' in this passage simply means hell. The broad road leads to hell.

Eliminating wickedness

The term 'destruction' is very much connected with the whole idea of hell. Hell has to do with destruction. You see, there are certain things which you cannot keep. You have to destroy it. Otherwise it may destroy you. Take for example garbage. Household garbage is mostly composed of organic waste. You cannot keep it for too long in your home. If you do, the smell will force you to do something about it. You will have to dispose of it. Imagine now the situation if the garbage workers in your city were on strike. There is no more garbage pick-up. Day after day, garbage bags are piling up on the streets. Then hungry animals begin to tear these plastic bags, hoping to find food. Imagine the germs, the maggots, that can spread everywhere. Soon garbage becomes a threat to human health. This is what I mean when I say that certain things must be eliminated. If you don't do it, they will harm you.

This is where the meaning of the word 'hell' becomes interesting. 'Hell' is the English translation of the Greek word *geenna*. And *geenna* is a transliteration of the Hebrew expression *gê-ben-hinnôn*, which means 'Valley of the son of Hinnom.' The Valley of the son of Hinnom was an actual site, located on the southwest of Jerusalem. It was known in the OT as a place where dead bodies were dumped and burned. The Israelites used it to practice child sacrifice. They burned their sons and daughters in the fire during the reign of Ahaz and Manasseh (2 Chronicles 33:6, Jeremiah 7:31). In Jeremiah 19:6, God vowed that the Valley of the son of Hinnom would be changed to the Valley of Slaughter because of the high number of dead bodies that would be burned after the

destruction of Jerusalem. It is commonly said that the Valley of Hinnom became a garbage site for Jerusalem in the days of Jesus. So when people heard the word *geenna*, they would immediately think of a place where refuse and offal are dumped, a place where garbage is consumed by maggots and fire.

I repeat. Hell has to do with destruction. Garbage has to be destroyed. If we don't destroy it, it will become dangerous to us. It can destroy us. It is the same thing with wickedness. A God of justice cannot allow wickedness to go around freely. It has to be eliminated. And hell is God's instrument which eliminates wickedness.

We have to understand that wickedness does not have an existence of its own. Wickedness exists only in people, people who welcome evil in their lives. Wickedness would not exist if there were no one practicing it. For people who let evil breed in their lives, God has no alternative but to stop them and ultimately to destroy them.

Now evil can be removed in two ways. God can cleanse you of this evil by taking it upon Himself. This is the reason why Jesus died for us. When you repent, the blood of Christ cleanses you from your sins. If you do not repent, i.e., if you refuse His gracious invitation to cleanse you, it means that you have chosen to make yourself the repository of sin. Then you give God no choice. One day, He will have to eliminate you. That is why there has to be a hell. Hell is God's incinerator, if you allow me this comparison, which destroys evil so that the universe will not be polluted by it. You see how hell is a necessity in a universe where justice is to be maintained.

This being said, it is also important to mention that God does not wish to see anyone go to hell. He is pleading with us to avoid the way of destruction. Jesus came personally into this world to tell us not to go that way.

God cares for us. He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He said that explicitly in the OT. Ezekiel 33:11: *I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live.* It is not God's desire to destroy anyone. Peter said in his first letter that God's patience was waiting in the days of Noah (1Peter 3:20) and He is still waiting today, giving us every chance to repent. And in 2Peter 3:15, the apostle tells us to *regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation.* 'Consider God's patience as an opportunity to be saved.' He is restraining Himself as much as He can. But His patience has a limit. If at that limit it is evident that you have no intention of making a decisive rejection of sin, you give Him no choice. He will have to get rid of evil. And in doing so, He will have to eliminate you. He will do so with grief, but He will have to do it. Notice how Jesus wept over Jerusalem at the end of Matthew 23, 'How often would I have gathered you under my wings to save you from the judgment. But you didn't want my protection. You thought you were safe.' If Jesus spoke about hell, it was simply out of love, so that we understand the danger that is ahead and that we do not go down that way.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth

There are certain expressions in the Lord's teaching that are directly related to the topic of hell. We will look at three expressions. When we hear the words 'weeping and gnashing of teeth,' immediately we know that Jesus is talking about hell. This expression occurs 7x in the gospels: 6x in Matthew (8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30) and 1x in Luke (13:28).

What does this 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' mean? It is an indication of extreme suffering and remorse. It is the expression of total despair. Perhaps you have seen in a movie the reaction of people who are taken away to be executed. When you know that your life is going to end in the next few minutes, you are filled with a sense of utter despair. And so you 'weep and grind your teeth.'

But what is the relationship between the weeping and gnashing of teeth to hell? The weeping and gnashing of teeth will be man's reaction to the judgment of hell. He will be overwhelmed by a

sense of despair when he comes to realize that the way he had lived has brought him to this desperate end. What he did not believe before now becomes a reality. He suddenly realizes that hell is not an illusion. There is such a place as hell where God punishes unrepentant sinners and wipes out evil from His universe, where the wicked are sentenced to ultimate death.

The fire of hell

Another imagery is used by Jesus to talk about the final fate of the wicked. It is the imagery of fire. We have for example Matthew 5:22: ... *Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca, ' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the **fire** of hell. We read in Mark 9:43, *If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the **fire** never goes out. When Jesus said, *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the **fire*** (Matthew 7:19), He was telling us that the fate of evildoers is that they will be burned up in hell.**

The Lord Jesus connects this idea of fire with the weeping and gnashing of teeth in Matthew 13:41-42.

*Matthew 13:41. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, 42 and will cast them into the **furnace of fire**; in that place there shall be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**.*

Where will you weep and gnash your teeth if you reject God's salvation? It will be there in the fire, in the furnace of fire.

The outer darkness

The expression weeping and gnashing of teeth is connected with another expression: the outer darkness. Let's read Matthew 8:11-12.

*Matthew 8:11. And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; 12 but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the **outer darkness**; in that place there shall be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**.*

What is the outer darkness? The meaning becomes obvious when we compare Matthew 8:11-12 with Luke 13:27-28.

*Luke 13:27. And He will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from Me, all you evildoers.' 28 There will be **weeping and gnashing of teeth** there when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves **being cast out**.*

They will be cast out of where? Out of the kingdom, outside of the kingdom. So the outer darkness is the darkness outside of the kingdom of God.

You see, in the Scriptures, light represents life and darkness represents death. That is why in John 8:12, we find the expression 'the light of life.' Light represents life. Where there is no light, there is no life. It is darkness. And darkness is death. The outer darkness is the darkness outside the kingdom. Because only inside the kingdom is there light. Only inside the kingdom is there life. This is very important to understand. God's life is available to us only when we are inside the kingdom.

Notice that in the Bible, the kingdom of God and life are synonyms. To enter into the kingdom of God is to enter into life. To enter into life is to enter into the kingdom of God. They mean exactly the same thing. In the book of Revelation, we are told that the whole of the New Jerusalem is filled with light, God's light. God is the light of the New Jerusalem. Revelation 21:23: *And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.* This also means that God's life is everywhere in the New Jerusalem. But outside, there is darkness. Outside, there is death. And when a person is cast out into the outer darkness, it means that he is cut off from God's life. He dies.

You can see that through this phrase 'weeping and gnashing of teeth,' we find other expressions that describe hell. Jesus spoke about the 'furnace of fire' and the 'outer darkness.' Although the imagery is different, the meaning is the same. What happens to you in the fire? You are consumed. You die. In the same way, what happens to you outside, in the darkness? You have no life. You die.

In our next lesson, we will continue to study the topic of hell.