

Hell – Freedom's Greatest Compliment (Part 1)
(Rev. Dr. John Bartol)

"Whenever I speak about hell I do so with a broken heart"

D.L. Moody, Evangelist

This is the most difficult topic on which I've ever been asked to express my opinion. It would be far easier for me to evade it. But I cannot honestly do so because of the strong support found throughout the history of mankind and most of all in the teaching of Christ.

First, let us try to clear up some of the misconceptions about hell:

The devil is often pictured at the gate of hell, welcoming his followers and supervising the activity. But according to Scripture, Satan has nothing to do with the management of hell –He is the most deserving inmate! Hell was not made for mankind. The Bible makes it clear that hell was created for the devil and his angels. (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:10). With degrees of punishment in hell, the devil will be in the lowest pit of condemnation, torment and shame. I think Satan knows this and that is why he is working overtime, seeking to take to hell as many followers as possible.

Another misconception over hell is in regard to some of the images and language concerning it, such as scenes of Satan dangling his followers over the flames. These pictures do not come from the Bible but from the Middle Ages, the poetry of Dante and Milton or the paintings of Dore.

To clarify the matter, we must keep in mind that the Bible often contains metaphors, similes or symbolic language. For example, Jesus said, "I am the door" (John 10:7,9); "I am the Vine" (John 15:1,5). Please note that in each case the metaphor or word picture always points to a far greater reality.

CS Lewis warns us not to confuse the biblical doctrine of hell with the imagery by which it may be conveyed. For example, the lake of fire and brimstone in Revelation 20:14 is no doubt a picture of something so terrible it is almost impossible to find adequate words to describe. Author Lee Strobel clarifies this truth- "Any figure of speech has a literal point. What is figurative is the burning flame. What is literal is that this is a place of utter heartbreak. It's a loss of everything. The Bible is trying to communicate that Hell is the worst possible situation a person could ever find himself in."

Instead of looking at Hell as a physical torture chamber, I see it more as a broken relationship - the natural consequence and final destiny of those who refuse to live in right relationship with God. You will not find in heaven anyone who consistently and persistently refuses to have a personal relationship with God. That is the ultimate sin!

However, we can be thankful that in his love, God sets before us many obstructions to keep us from choosing that broad road that leads to destruction. He gives us the Bible, the Christian church, prayers of friends and loved ones, and above all the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross.

Jesus said "*Those who come to me I will never, never reject them.*"
(John 6:37 NLT)

(To be continued)