

REDEEMER

R E P O R T

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THE IMPORTANCE OF HELL

BY TIM KELLER

Not only are there plenty of people today who don't believe in the Bible's teaching on everlasting punishment, even those who do can find it an unreal and remote concept. Nevertheless, it is a very important part of the Christian faith, for several reasons.

1. It is important because Jesus taught about it more than all other Biblical authors put together.

Jesus speaks of "eternal fire and punishment" as the final abode of the angels and human beings who have rejected God (Matthew 25:41,46) He says that those who give into sin will be in danger of the "fire of hell" (Matthew 5:22; 18:8-9.) The word Jesus uses for 'hell' is *Gehenna*, a valley in which piles of garbage were daily burned as well as the corpses of those without families who could bury them. In Matthew 10:28 says, "Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." He is speaking to disciples, some of whom will eventually be tortured, sawn in half, flayed and burned alive. Yet, he says, that is a picnic compared to hell. Clearly, for Jesus hell was a real place, since

he said that after judgment day people would experience it in their bodies.

2. It is important because it shows how infinitely dependent we are on God for everything.

Virtually all commentators and theologians believe that the Biblical images of fire and outer darkness are metaphorical. (Since souls are in hell right now, without bodies, how could the fire be literal, physical fire?) To say that the Scriptural image of hell-fire is not literal is of no comfort, however. The reality will be far worse than the image. What, then, are the 'fire' and 'darkness' symbols for?

In the teaching of Jesus the ultimate condemnation from the mouth of God is "depart from me." That is remarkable—to simply be away from God is the worst thing that can happen to us! Why? We were originally created to walk in God's immediate presence (Genesis 2.) All the life, joy, love, strength, and meaning we have looked for and longed for is found in his face (Psalm 16:11)—that is, in his favor, presence, fellowship, and pleasure. That is why, for Paul, the everlasting fire and destruction of hell is "exclusion from the presence of the Lord."

(2 Thessalonians 1:9.) Separation from God and his blessings forever is the reality to which all the symbols point. Fire and darkness represent eternal, spiritual decomposition and disintegration.

3. It is important because it unveils the seriousness and danger of living life for yourself.

In Romans 1-2 Paul explains that God, in his wrath against those who reject him, "gives them up" to the sinful passions of their hearts. It means that the worst (and fairest) punishment God can give a person is to actively give them their sinful hearts' deepest desire. What is that? The desire of the sinful human heart is for independence. We want to choose and go *our own* way (Isaiah 53:6.) We want to get away from God—but, as we have seen, this is the very thing that is most destructive to us. Cain is warned not to sin because sin is slavery. (Genesis 4:7; John 8:34,) it destroys your ability to choose, love, enjoy. Sin also brings blindness—the more you reject the truth about God the more incapable you are of perceiving any truth about yourself or the world (Romans 1:21.)

What is hell, then? It is God
(Continued on page 2)



INSIDE: • THE IMPORTANCE OF HELL CONT'D • UGANDA MISSION TEAM SAYS *THANK YOU!*
• WITH GRATITUDE FOR YOUR GENEROSITY! • WANTED: BETA GROUP LEADERS
• SAVE THE DATE: ENTREPRENEURSHIP INITIATIVE BUSINESS PLAN COMPETITION

banishing us to regions we have desperately tried to get into all our lives. J.I.Packer writes: "*Scripture sees hell as self-chosen...[H]ell appears as a God's gesture of respect for human choice. All receive what they actually chose, either to be with God forever, worshipping him, or without God forever, worshipping themselves.*" (J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* p.262-263.) Even in this world it is clear that self-centeredness rather than God-centeredness makes you miserable and blind. The more self-absorbed, self-pitying, and self-justifying people are, the more breakdowns occur, relationally, psychologically, and even physically. They also go deeper into denial about the source of their problems. But if, as the Bible teaches, our souls live on, then hell is simply one's freely chosen path going on forever and ever. We wanted to get away from God, and God, in his justice, sends us where we wanted to go.

I've found that only stressing the symbols of hell (fire and darkness) in preaching rather than going into what the symbols refer to (eternal, spiritual decomposition) actually prevents modern people from finding hell a deterrent. Some years ago I remember

a man who said that talk about the fires of hell simply didn't scare him, it seemed too far-fetched, even silly. So I read him these lines from C.S. Lewis:

Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others... but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. It is not a question of God 'sending us' to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE Hell unless it is nipped in the bud.

To my surprise he got very quiet and said, "Now *that* scares me to death." He almost immediately began to see that hell was a) perfectly fair and just, and b) something that he realized he might be headed for if he didn't change.

4. It is important because it is the only way to know how much Jesus loved us and how much he did for us. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says that no physical destruction can be compared with the spiritual destruction of hell, of losing the presence of God. But

this is exactly what happened to Jesus on the cross—he was forsaken by the Father (Matthew 27:46.) In Luke 16:24 the rich man in hell is desperately thirsty (v.24) and on the cross Jesus said "I thirst" (John 19:28.) The water of life, the presence of God, was taken from him. The point is this. Unless we come to grips with this "terrible" doctrine, we will never even begin to understand the depths of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

We must come to grips with the fact that Jesus said more about hell than Daniel, Isaiah, Paul, John, Peter put together. Before we dismiss this, we have to realize we are saying to Jesus, the pre-eminent teacher of love and grace in history, "I am less barbaric than you, Jesus—I am more compassionate and wiser than you." Surely that should give us pause! Indeed, upon reflection, it is *because* of the doctrine of judgment and hell that Jesus proclamation of grace and love are so brilliant and astounding.

A longer and more detailed version of the article is available at www.redeemer.com

REDEEMER REPORT

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HUNTER COLLEGE AUDITORIUM East 69TH (Between Park & Lexington) services at 10:30AM • 6:00PM	ETHICAL CULTURE West 64TH and CPW service at 9:15AM	FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH Corner of West 79TH and Broadway service at 5:00PM & 7:15PM
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UGANDA MISSION TEAM SAYS *THANK YOU!*

The Jr. & Sr. High Ministry's students, leaders and parents wish to thank all those in the congregation who supported our mission team to Uganda. At the end of June the youth group held a 10 mile walk-a-thon in Central Park to help raise money for the team towards the cost of travel, vaccinations and supplies. The response of the congregation was extremely generous and we are extremely grateful for the \$6,000+ donated by so many of you. Please continue to support our team with your prayers.

Specifically pray for the safe travel, good health and effective ministry of our team during our

trip: August 14-24. We will be working with a school "TAOST" which works with orphans effected by AIDS. If you would like to pray for our team by name, a list of the team follows:



Leaders: Cregan Cooke, Dave Knowles, Tommy Haskins, Mandy McGehee and Amber Seale

Students: Zazie Beetz, Jess Wentling, Jenna Bitar, Bianca Rogers, Seth Bixler, James Louie, Max Wolf and Joe Strong.

Again we are so thankful for your prayers and generosity. We look forward to sharing with you about our trip upon our return.

WITH GRATITUDE FOR YOUR GENEROSITY!

Thank you for responding and giving generously to the relief efforts in Burma (aka Myanmar) and China. As you know, Burma was hit by a devastating cyclone and China was impacted by a massive earthquake

hit. Back in May, the Church took a special offering for disaster relief and received a total of just over \$100,000! Because of this offering, we were able to send the funds to World Vision, Mission to the World, Campus Crusade

for Christ and Food for the Hungry to further relief efforts currently being carried out by these four organizations. Please know that your participation in God's restoration is very much appreciated. Thank you again.

SAVE THE DATE: ENTREPRENEURSHIP INITIATIVE BUSINESS PLAN COMPETITION

On Sunday, October 5, 2008, we will launch our annual competition to identify entrepreneurs within the congregation with bold ideas for Gospel-advancing ventures. Check out website, www.faithandwork.org/ei for more details throughout the summer. We will host an information session at Hunter College on Sunday, October 12. Submissions will be accepted from October 5 to November 10.



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WANTED: BETA GROUP LEADERS

- *No Experience Necessary*
- *Will Train*
- *Only a 7-Week Commitment*
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If you are currently a leader in any capacity at Redeemer, then recommend someone to lead a Beta Group this fall. Beta Groups are a great ministry opportunity for someone you know whose career and/or life commitments keep them from serving the church more regularly.

To recommend someone go to www.redeemer.com/betagroups/recommendations.

COUPLES GETAWAY AUGUST 15-17

If you're in the early years of marriage, join us for this Couples Getaway weekend featuring gourmet meals at an elegant lodge. There will be plenty of outdoor activities, inspiring worship and useful teaching. We'll look into the common struggles as well as the amazing intimacy of marriage. Teaching sessions include: "Designed to be Different" and "Sex begins in the Kitchen."

For more details and to register visit www.redeemergetaways.com

Email: getaways@redeemer.com