

Session 6

November 19, 2023

IS HELL REAL?

2 Thessalonians 1:3-12

It's probably no surprise that more people believe in a literal heaven than a literal hell. How many times have we heard someone say, "Well, they're in a better place now" after the passing of a loved one, regardless of the godless lifestyle they've lived and mounds of evidence to the contrary?! But if heaven exists (and it does), then hell must exist as well (and it does). Human *expectation* tells us there is a heaven and a hell. As Solomon said, God has "set eternity" in our hearts (Eccl. 3:11). Deep down, we all believe that 76 years of life is too little. There must be something more, out there, in eternity. As I mentioned last week, human *evaluation* tells us there must be a heaven and a hell. None of us would buy the ridiculous notion that people like Adrian Rogers and Billy Graham would share the same eternal destiny as people like Saddam Hussein and Adolf Hitler. We all share a certain sense of justice and that extends ultimately to eternal destiny. But most importantly, divine *revelation* tells us there is a heaven and a hell. The Bible is replete with references to both, and speaks of them as equally real, equally tangible, and equally eternal.

Believe it or not, the context of this week's passage is to provide encouragement to believers who were being persecuted in Thessalonica. But in his discussion about the judgment of evildoers, the apostle Paul provides insight into the reality of eternal damnation. Three key ideas are highlighted.

Explanation (vv. 3-7). We know that salvation is not based on works. But we also know that one's outward works provide the clearest evidence of one's inward condition (see Matt. 7:16). Here, Paul describes the stark contrast between the righteous church and the wicked world that was attacking it. Twice Paul mentions the believers' steadfast *faith*. In verse 3, he points out that it was a *flourishing* faith and a *growing* faith. This made the church praiseworthy (v. 4); an example to others. Apparently, the church's godly response to persecution was just as obvious as the overt attacks against it! Then he says it was an *enduring* faith. It is a biblical teaching that persecution increases faith as much as tribulation increases patience (see 2 Tim. 3:11-12; Rom. 5:3). Verse 5 puts Paul's discussion in context. Their evidence of strong faith in the face of strong persecution indicates the difference between the church and the world. Moreover, it begs for God's intervention. That's what Paul means in verses 5-7. The church is suffering now, but just wait! The righteousness of God demands divine retribution and the faithfulness of God to His children guarantees it. For reflection: *Have you ever read Nik Ripken's The Insanity of God (or seen the movie)? What a great illustration of these things in today's global context.*

Retribution (vv. 7-10). In this section, Paul describes the logistics of God's judgment. (1) When will it happen? At Christ's return (v. 7). We should remember that God's word paints the End Times in very broad strokes! It's not Paul's purpose here to establish specific details regarding the End Times, but rather to put things in general perspective. (2) What will happen? Powerful angels and a flaming sword will bring vengeance (v. 8). (3) Who will face this outpouring of wrath? "Those who don't know God and on those who don't obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus"

(v. 8). That's all lost people in general, and those attacking His church in specific. (4) What is the result? They will be destroyed from the presence (literally *face*) of the Lord and expelled from His glorious strength (v. 9). In other words, they will be separated from that which God *is*, and that which He purposed to share with humanity. Verse 10 provides the contrast of those evil-doers who miss out on God's purpose with the redeemed who fulfill it. For reflection: *Some believe that God's condemnation is temporary and ends in annihilation. What biblical evidence indicates that hell really is real and lasts forever?*

Motivation (vv. 11-12). Paul concludes this section with a series of prayer concerns aimed at the church. Four requests are mentioned. First, that they would live up to the holy calling that God had placed upon them. This certainly includes the suffering they were enduring, but likely the ongoing challenges of the Christian life as well. Next, he prays that, with God's help, they would fulfill all that He desires for them to accomplish. Third, he prays that their testimony for Christ would be magnified, even in the midst of their affliction. Finally, he prays that they too would be glorified by Him. The context would indicate a kind of strengthening in their present situation, but no doubt reminded them of the ultimate glorification that awaited them in heaven. For reflection: *Read Rom. 8:18. How does this fit into this week's lesson? What applications can we make for today's church?*