

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

LOVE, GOD, AND HELL

By Matthew Bassford

One of the most common rhetorical questions that skeptics ask of Christians is, “If God is so loving, then how can He condemn the sinner to everlasting torment in hell?” On its face, this question has some merit. After all, hell as presented in Scripture is a truly terrible place where, in the words of Isaiah, **“Their worm will not die, and their fire will not be quenched”** (Isa. 66:24). The imperfections of my spirit are legion, yet I can’t think of a single person I would want to see in hell. How, then, could a loving God consign most of mankind to a place of eternal suffering? The problem with the question is that it places the blame on exactly the wrong set of shoulders. Not one single sinner will end up in hell because God didn’t love him. Instead, every sinner will be there because they didn’t love God.

God’s love for mankind is proclaimed in numerous ways. He reveals Himself in the beauty and grandeur of the physical creation. He sends sunshine and rain on the just and on the unjust alike; not because He has to, but because He wants to. He reveals Himself in His word, in the story of His faithful dealings with His often-faithless people. Most of all, God proclaims His love for us in His Son. In Christ, we see the fullness of deity revealed. The nature of Jesus explains the nature of God Himself: His power, His holiness, and especially His love. That love finds its highest expression in the gracious self-sacrifice of Christ for the undeserving sinner. After that, what more could God do to reach out to His alienated creation? What greater proof of His love could He offer?

The sinner, though, has remained a sinner because he has encountered the love of God and remained unmoved. He surveys God’s physical handiwork yet does not honor God nor give thanks. He accepts God’s providential blessings yet remains ungrateful and wicked. He has the opportunity to search the Scriptures, yet he either chooses to remain ignorant or does not respond to hearing with faith. Most of all, the sinner rejects the invitation to come to know God through Christ, and he dismisses the cross as insignificant.

Honestly, what is God supposed to do with somebody like that? God has done all He could do to reach out to the sinner in the love, and the sinner has steadfastly refused each entreaty. He has remained a sinner precisely because he wants nothing to do with God.

Several weeks ago, I wrote a post entitled “Why I Want to Go to Heaven.” My reasoning there is simple. Heaven is where God is, and I love God and want to be with Him. Indeed, heaven is heaven to me because God is there.

What, then, of the unrepentant sinner who has spent his life insistently having nothing to do with God? Heaven for someone like that wouldn’t be an eternity of bliss. It would be an eternity of misery. Heaven would, in fact, resemble Sartre’s vision of hell in *No Exit*: being trapped forever with someone you despise. Perhaps we should ask instead, “How could a loving God condemn the sinner to heaven?”

If the sinner cannot spend eternity with God (and indeed does not want to), then he must spend eternity apart from God. There’s no third way. Consider, for instance, Paul’s description of hell in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, as **“eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”** It has to be that way. Those who reject God also reject His nearness and His blessings. Just as we don’t (or shouldn’t, at least) continually force ourselves on those who don’t want anything to do with us, eventually God gives up too.

That final surrender has dramatic consequences. After all, every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above. If we owe every good thing we have to God, His final withdrawal from our lives means that noth-

ing good is left in those lives either. Absolute zero isn't the complete presence of cold. It is simply the complete absence of heat. Hell doesn't need some added suffering in order to be hell. It only needs the complete absence of God.

Is such a place wretched and miserable beyond our ability to comprehend? Certainly. All of us have spent our lives immersed in the kindness of God, and the withdrawal of His grace from us does not bear contemplating. However, those who find themselves in the midst of such suffering cannot blame God. They can only blame themselves. ■

BEWARE!

By John Edwards

The word "**beware**" is a warning word that cautions of danger. To beware suggests to be on guard! Let's notice some Bible beware's.

BEWARE LEST THOU FORGET THE LORD. It is written in Deuteronomy 6:12, "*...beware lest thou forget the Lord...*" In times of plenty, we are more apt to forget God (Deut. 8:7-14). We are foolish when we leave God out of our thoughts and plans (Lk. 12:16-21). Sadly, the Lord has been forgotten many times. God said, "*Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? yet my people have forgotten me days without number*" (Jer. 2:32).

BEWARE AND DRINK NOT WINE NOR STRONG DRINK. Judges 13:4 records, "*Now therefore beware, I pray thee, and drink not wine nor strong drink...*" We need to be alerted to the dangers of drinking alcoholic beverages. The Bible condemns drinking, from the social drink to full-blown drunkenness (1 Pet. 4:3).

BEWARE OF FALSE PROPHETS. Jesus cautioned His disciples, "*Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves*" (Matt. 7:15). The apostle Paul warned the Ephesian Christians for three years that there would be "*...grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock...*" (Acts 20:28-31). Let us "*...believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world*" (1 Jn. 4:1).

BEWARE OF LEAVEN. Jesus told His disciples, "*Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees*" (Matt. 16:6). Jesus did not have reference to their bread, but rather to their doctrine (v. 12). We need to beware of false doctrine!

BEWARE OF MEN. Jesus warned, "**But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues**" (Matt. 10:17). In Colossians 2:8 Paul cautioned the saints, "*Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.*" This will help us to put our faith in God, instead of men (1 Cor. 2:5).

BEWARE OF COVETOUSNESS. It is written, "*Take heed, and beware of covetousness; for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things he possesseth*" (Lk. 12:15). Covetousness is earnestly desiring the property of another. Paul spoke of "*...covetousness, which is idolatry*" (Col. 3:5).

BEWARE OF FALLING FROM STEDFASTNESS. Peter wrote, "*Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness*" (2 Pet. 3:17). In order to keep from falling, we must give diligence to add to our faith (2 Pet. 1:5-10). ■

Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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