

The Power of the Good News!

By

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“...the gospel...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...” (Rom. 1:16)

Not long ago an evangelical preacher remarked that to deny the reality of eternal suffering was to “pull the rug from under the feet of the gospel preacher.” While not questioning the speaker’s sincerity, his statement must be questioned. If it was intended to mean that the absence of the teaching of eternal conscious punishment rendered the preaching of the gospel ineffective, then a moment’s reflection will show that this cannot be true. If it *were* true, then every time the gospel is preached, the realities of eternal suffering ought to be plainly set forth if the preaching is to have any effect.

Many gospel addresses preached by (orthodox) evangelical men do not mention eternal suffering. Sometimes the word “hell” may be used as being the destination of unbelievers, but the term is not explained, but left to the untaught imagination of the hearers. It would seem that even orthodox preachers are somewhat reluctant to proclaim what they understand by these terms, but if they believe them to be essential to the presentation of the gospel, then they OUGHT to be proclaimed as a valid part of their message. In my experience this is not being done, and on the rare occasions when it is, there is no evidence as far as I know, that the message has been any more effective. Indeed, it may well have the opposite effect, and drive the hearers away.

We must ask them, if men are not to be frightened into belief by fear of eternal torment, what is the biblical way by which they will be brought to Christ? Not surely, by fear of eternal suffering, but by the realization of their own sinfulness in the sight of God, and a recognition that there is nothing they can do by tears, penance, or good works, that can relieve them of this awful burden of guilt, and the condemnation in which they stand.

Such a revelation can only come from God himself; it can never come from man’s own conscience. Even when he knows he has done wrong, man excuses himself. He will never see himself as a sinner in God’s sight until God reveals it to him by the holy spirit. Only this can bring the true conviction of sin which will prostrate a man before God under the awful weight of guilt, and cause him to cry for mercy.

This is in line with the teaching of the Lord Jesus, who said: “When he, the holy spirit is come, he will convict the world in regard to sin...” (John 16:8 NIV). It is this vital work of the holy spirit bringing men and women to a realization of their own innate sinfulness, and the impossibility of making themselves acceptable to a righteous and holy God, that must be the key to effective evangelical preaching. As has been well said: “The essence of true conviction, is a concern for what **I am**, rather than what I have done or not done.”¹ This is illustrated by a number of examples from Scripture. Job said: “...now my eyes have seen you, therefore I DESPISE MYSELF, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:16). David acknowledged: “Surely I HAVE BEEN A SINNER from birth, and sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Psa. 51:5). The prophet Isaiah confessed: “...I saw the Lord, high and lifted up...then I said ‘Woe is me for I AM A MAN OF UNCLEAN LIPS...” (Isa. 6:5). In the New Testament we find Peter saying: “Go away

from me Lord, for I AM A SINFUL MAN” (Luke 5:8), and in the same gospel the unnamed Tax-collector prays: “God be merciful to ME A SINNER” (Luke 8:13). Jesus adds that this man went home justified. All these men did not merely confess to wrong doing, but to their sinful nature which led to the wrong doing, even though many of them might be counted very good men by the world’s standards. Compare these examples with Judas Iscariot who betrayed the Lord, and then said: “I have sinned...” (Matt. 27:4). Note that he did **not** say “I AM a sinner.” Like many today, he was ready to confess to a sinful act, but not to a sinful nature.

The essence of the Gospel is that Christ Jesus alone can save sinners and that salvation is found in no-one else for there is not other name under heaven given to men whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). But men will have no inclination to heed this message until the holy Spirit reveals to them their own sinfulness and their own utter inability to make themselves fit to stand before God. The holy Spirit alone can accomplish this; He alone can draw or drive men to Christ, not threats of eternal suffering, derived from some misunderstood and misquoted verses of scripture used by some in the misguided belief that it will reinforce the gospel message.

This is not to say that the preacher of the Good News should not warn men of the danger in which they stand if they reject the good news, but the issues to be faced are LIFE and DEATH, not eternal bliss and eternal suffering. The LIFE promised to those who put their trust in Christ is not merely a continuation for endless years of the kind of life we live in this present world. Immortality, the free gift of God through Christ, is life of a very different quality, as well as being of endless duration. This life will be ushered in by a glorious resurrection, when our “perishable bodies” will be raised imperishable, in the likeness of the body of our glorious risen Lord, and no longer subject to the pains and penalties of this present life. On the other hand, for those who reject the gospel message there is only “a fearful expectation of judgment and raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Heb. 10:27).

Some may argue that the prospect of eternal oblivion is not so terrible after all. They may well say this against the background of life in this present imperfect sinful world (where life for many can be very terrible indeed), but in the Day of Judgment they will realize too late the glories of the eternal world which they have forever and irrevocably forfeited and the awful certainty of the eternal death to which they will inevitably be consigned; then they may well have cause to think otherwise.

There may be those who under certain kinds of preaching, have come to trust in Christ through fear of eternal suffering and may thank God for escaping such a fate. But have they really understood the gospel? The purpose of Christ’s death was to save men from sin (Matt. 1:21), and if we are saved from sin, we are saved from death also. Throughout Scripture, sin and death are inextricably linked; you never find one without the other. Had there been no sin, there would have been no death. Christ does not save us from death without saving us from sin, and if he saves us from sin, we are also saved from death — the penalty of sin. When Christ died for our sins, he did not simply pass into another form of existence — he DIED, else was sin’s penalty not paid. Speaking of Christ as the mediator of salvation, Cullman² writes: “He must indeed be the very one who in death conquers death itself, he cannot obtain this victory by simply living on as an immortal soul, thus fundamentally not dying. He can conquer death only by truly dying.

Thus all who are not saved from their sins, just suffer sin's penalty — the forfeiture of life, i.e., death, not life lived on in some other place or some other condition.

The Bible never asserts that man is inherently immortal, or that he is possessed of “an immortal soul” (an idea commonly held, but which comes not from God's inspired revelation, but from Greek philosophy). The Bible does however teach that man although mortal, is capable of attaining immortality, but only on the condition that his sin is adequately dealt with — something that man can never achieve by his own efforts. God certainly never intended that the entry of sin into the world would give rise to a race of immortal sinners. This is clear from Genesis 3:22–24, where God bars the way preventing sinful Adam from gaining access to the Tree of Life. God's penalty pronounced against sinners had to be DEATH, and this could never mean that the ‘souls’ of sinful men should continue to exist in their sin for eternal years. This would imply the indestructibility of sin, and would in effect, nullify God's sentence of death upon sinners, and sin would thus become an eternal affront to the holiness of God. Only the **death** of sinful man could satisfy God's holiness, which was why Christ, if he was to be the sin bearer, had to DIE. Having thus dealt with our sins, which he did utterly and completely, and, having no sins of his own, God raised him up again, not now in the ‘likeness of sinful man’ (Rom. 8:3) but in ‘the power of an indestructible life’ (Heb. 7:16).

The resurrection of Christ proved two things. First, that God accepted his sacrifice on behalf of sinners, and second, that all who trust Christ for salvation know that the power of sin and death has been broken, and they too are guaranteed a resurrection like his, according to his promise in John 6:40; “For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” Further, on that day the believer in Christ will ‘put on immortality’ (I Cor. 15:54) and that is the **only** way the priceless boon of immortality may be gained.

For those who reject the good news of the gospel, there will be a resurrection also, not of glory but of shame, for “they have stored up wrath against themselves for the Day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed, and God will give to each person according to what he has done” (Rom. 2:6). When this judgment is finished the sinner will receive in himself the just penalty given all those years before in Eden to sinful man: “You shall surely DIE” (Gen. 2:15). So will he be consigned to the oblivion of eternal death, for “those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus, will be punished with eternal destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord...” (II Thess. 1:8–9).

To preach the terrors of eternal suffering is to misrepresent the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, who “DIED for our sins according to the scriptures, was BURIED, and ROSE AGAIN on the third day...” (I Cor. 15:3–4). The free gift for accepting this message of Good News is immortality; the penalty of refusing it is eternal death, withdrawal of all the blessings of God's greatest gift mediated to us by Jesus Christ His Son — LIFE itself.

The key to the effective preaching of the gospel then is that men should be made to see they need to be delivered, not from suffering, but from SIN, and that only Christ can accomplish for them what they can never do for themselves.

Since left to himself man will never see any need to be freed from sin, we need to pray that whenever and wherever the gospel is proclaimed in sincerity and truth, the holy Spirit will do that convicting and converting work that only he can accomplish.

The uniqueness of the gospel message is that Christ died to save us from our SINS — a salvation that can be found nowhere else. While we may deplore the fact that sometimes a wrong emphasis is put into the message, and ideas attributed to it that it does not possess, perhaps we should say with Paul in Phil. 1:18, “But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.”

- References:** 1. Marginal note in the “*Companion Bible*”, Samuel Bagster, London.
2. Oscar Cullman, “*Immortality of the Soul, or Resurrection of the Dead?*”
The Epworth Press, London.

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