

CLASSIC ERRORS ABOUT HELL

BY

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The views about “hell” heard in a sermon by Dr. D. James Kennedy of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, are typical of what one hears today from leaders who pose as spokesmen for “traditional orthodoxy.” Sad to say, earnest Christians seeking Biblical truth on the subject are loathe to believe that a voice of such eminence as Kennedy’s could lead them astray.

Dr. Kennedy began by quoting a Princeton theologian, A. A. Hodge, who claimed that the Jews “uniformly understood” the scriptures to teach that the wicked are to suffer forever, which he then supported by a statement from Josephus! He failed to note that Jesus branded the Jews as liars (John 8:44), and accused the Pharisees of leaving the commandments of God to “hold fast the traditions of men” (Mark 7:8). How then can the views of the Pharisees be the basis of Biblical truth?

Then he stated that “the reformers” and “historical churches” were agreed in teaching “the endlessness of the future sufferings” of the unredeemed. This remarkable statement ignored the fact that many early reformers attacked this very doctrine. The Waldensians, who laid the groundwork for the Reformation, opposed the doctrine of endless suffering. Both John Wycliff (1320–1384) and Martin Luther (1483–1546) adamantly opposed the “immortal soul” concept. Luther called it one of “the Pope’s monstrous opinions.” In 1660 the London Confession of Faith (Baptist) affirmed that man is mortal and that the wicked are to perish. John Milton and Isaac Watts, the beloved hymn writer, insisted that the final punishment of the unredeemed is “death, not eternal life in misery.”

TRADITIONAL BUZZ WORDS: Certain phrases such as *eternal hell*, *endless punishment*, and *immortal soul*, are used so often by preachers that many people think they are found often in the Bible. In fact, they are not in the Bible at all! Dr. Kennedy spoke of the “teaching of the Sacred Scriptures as to the endlessness of the future sufferings of all who die impenitent,” and says that “the Bible tells us that the unbeliever will go into endless punishment.” To support such statements he quoted Stiles and Hodge, but never any Scripture for such teachings.

Jesus spoke of *eternal punishment*, but this is quite different from endless suffering. Jesus warned that the unbeliever would *perish* (John 3:16), not live forever in suffering. Unfruitful branches are cast into the fire to be *burned up*, not to be preserved (John 15:2–6). In His parable of the wheat and tares (Matt. 13:24–30), the tares are the “children of the wicked one,” vs. 38, to be cast into “a furnace of fire” vs. 42, clearly representing destruction, not torture. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus told his disciples to fear Him (i.e., Almighty God) who is able to destroy body and life in Gehenna.

EVASION OF BIBLICAL DISTINCTIONS: Dr. Kennedy said that Christ “talked more about *hell* than any other person in Scripture.” He evidently did not study his concordance before speaking, and he apparently only uses an English version (such as the KJV) in which the single word “hell” is used without distinction for three different Greek words that have totally different meanings, namely, (1) *Hades* (same as *Sheol* in

the OT Hebrew), meaning the place or state of the dead, both saved and unsaved, until Resurrection Day of John 5:28, (2) *Gehenna*, or the Valley of Hinnom, the Jerusalem city dump for garbage, trash and dead bodies of all kinds (including human), where both fire and maggots were always at work, to signify the final destination of the unsaved after Judgment Day, and (3) *tartarus*, used only in II Peter 2:4, for the abode of “the angels that sinned.”

As to who uses Sheol/hades most in the Bible, David and Solomon (Psalms and Proverbs) used it 14 times; the OT Prophets used it 13 times; Jesus used it 3 times; Peter used it twice at Pentecost in Acts; and John uses it 4 times in Revelation.

As to Gehenna, Jesus used it on 6 occasions, twice calling it Gehenna-fire, and James uses it once. It appears 13 times in the OT, always as the Valley of Hinnom, often as a place of idolatry, fire and horror.

To prove his point that the unsaved will suffer forever, Dr. Kennedy took the phrase “the worm in him dies not,” from Mark 9:48, where Jesus quoted from Isaiah 66:24 and *worm* plainly means *maggot* (as a destroyer, along with fire, in the city dump). Jesus’ listeners knew that he was describing the twin destroyers, fire and maggots, in the garbage dump outside the city walls, and certainly none would construe Jesus’ powerful imagery as describing perpetual suffering in hell as some evangelists do. It is incredible that such a scholar as Dr. Kennedy would be so ignorant of this!

ETERNALITY OF SOULS: “It would be well,” Dr. Kennedy said, “for us to consider for a moment the eternality of our souls, which shall dwell either in the bliss and felicity of Paradise or in the condign punishment of Hell.” Then he asked the question so popular with evangelists, “Where will you spend eternity?”

Indeed, it would be well to consider this subject. If man has an eternal soul that must live forever, it seems that God would have mentioned not once but many times in Scripture. But not once is it found in the OT. Nor do we find it ever stated by Jesus or the Apostles in the NT.

Dr. Kennedy’s phrase “eternality of our souls” implies, (1) that man has a soul that is separable from his person, and (2) that this entity is innately immortal. Such a concept comes straight from Plato and pagan mythology!

Scripture defines the make-up of man in the creation story: “And God formed man of the dust of the earth, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became (not received) a living soul (Hebrew = living being). Genesis 2:7. It is man, the entire person, that is formed out of dust, and it is man that is called “soul.” The same word translated “soul” is used for living creatures in the world of animals (Gen 1:20, 21, 24, 7:22, 9:10, etc.). God did not put a soul into man. He breathed into him the “Breath of Life,” at which moment the man became a soul, or a living being.

Instead of revealing that there was something eternal about this soul (man) the creator emphasized his mortality when warning him about the forbidden fruit: “In the day you eat of it, dying you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). And after Adam’s disobedience God said to him, “Dust you are and unto dust you shall return.” God’s sentence of death for sin made no mention of perpetual suffering for some unseen part of Adam! It was to be a process of dying, ending in total death. Adam lived to the age of 930 years.

Moreover, the sentence upon Adam was the very opposite of living forever, which they might have done if left in the Garden to eat of the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:22–23). Therefore both Adam and Eve were expelled by God, and barred from entering again.

Contrary to the notion that the punishment for sin is eternal suffering, the Bible says, “The soul that sins, it shall die” (Ezek. 18:4, 20). But Dr. Kennedy told his listeners that their immortal souls would live forever! Scripture promises immortality only to Christians (John 3:16, 3:36).

A STRONG CONTRADICTION: Dr. Kennedy then reported the testimony of a man who supposedly died, went to “hell,” and returned to tell about it. (Thus he implied that one might be cast into hell and escape again, which contradicted his earlier statement that one who dies impenitent must live in hell forever!).

Now we know that many people have reported “death experiences” without being truly dead. But the Bible says, “It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that comes judgment” i.e., at the LAST DAY (Heb. 9:27). We cannot let so-called death experiences set aside the truth of the Scriptures.

WHAT ABOUT THE DEBT CHRIST PAID? On this topic Dr. Kennedy was on scriptural ground in stating that the wages of sin is death and that Christ paid that penalty on the cross. But here he contradicted previous statements that the punishment for sin was endless suffering. Jesus’ suffering of the cross was not endless, but the penalty he paid for us was certainly death.

This fulfilled the prescription for atonement laid down by God in the Levitical sacrifices (Lev. 17:11, etc.). Atonement was not made by torturing the lamb, but by slaying it. The same principle is stated in the New Testament regarding the atoning work of Jesus for us. It was not the shame or the pain of the cross, but his actual death which purchased our redemption. See Rom. 5:6–11, II Cor. 5:14–21, Heb. 9:26, I Peter 3:18.

But, if the penalty for sin is to “live forever – somewhere” in endless suffering, as Dr. Kennedy declared, by what stretch of language can it be said that this penalty has been paid once and forever by the death of Christ?

The wages of sin is death, total and final, and we give thanks to God that, for all whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life, that penalty has been paid in the death of Jesus, our Savior and Lord; and the proof of payment came when God raised him from the dead.

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