

A Very Important Reason to Keep Preaching Hell to Mature Believers!

It can be tempting for pastors and elders, who serve gathered congregations of saints, to be misled into thinking that we no longer need to reflect on the excruciating sorrows of the damned. Such weakening resolution can be diminished even further by comments from the pews (or indeed other pulpits) that the people need more grace - more of the sugar, none of the vinegar.

Apart from the fact (as Mc Cheyne was keen to point out), that no-one preached the doctrine of eternal torment more frequently or powerfully than the Lord Jesus Christ (usually, it has to be said, in parallel to heaven), there is a very important motive, that relates to discipleship, for pausing to gaze into the ghastly ghetto of Gehenna - at the sight of wicked men (on earth) who thrive and go unchecked, we are prone to get worn out or be tempted to give up: regular reminders of the sobering doctrine of the eternal punishment of ungodly, Christless, souls, is needed to cultivate and preserve a circumspect, lively, joyful, steadfast, holy faith and hope.

It was forgetfulness of hellfire, and the unremitting pangs of the pit, that sent the Psalmist into a tailspin, wondering if a decided faith and pursuit of holiness had been a waste of time and hardly worthwhile after all - it is salutary to trace his descent from a robust conviction that, for Israel, surely "all things work for good", into a depressed, envious, fret that, as Billy Joel stupidly sang, "only the good die young."

1 Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. 2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. 3 For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. 4 For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. 5 They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like

the rest of mankind. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. 7 Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. 8 They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. 9 They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. 10 Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. 11 And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" 12 Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches - Psalm 73:1-12

Can you hear Asaph's anguished cry as hands are wrung and then flung up in the air? Or perhaps, in this case, it was more of a resigned, resentful, shrug, or a cold, despondent nod to a path of more chilled-out compromise - one that is less particular about the true necessity of salty thoughts and speech which might, in the past, have been a little over-cooked?

13 All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. 14 For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning - Psalm 73:13-14

But then he went to church, and (to speculate) in the company of saints, heard a Scripture reading from Numbers and a sermon on God's flaming justice that devoured sinners in the desert; or maybe (in the Temple) it was the sight of the cursed lawbreaker typified in the incinerating flames of altar wrath that charred the pre-slaughtered, sacrificial, substitute that was being offered up to Yahweh by the on-duty Levitical priest; or perhaps it was simply singing the closing words of the First or Second Psalms; whatever the case was, even the Temple wrath-recalling rites conveyed enough warning grace to stabilize his walk, rekindle faith and revive His walk in righteousness. Listen to his logic as he works through just deserts meted out in divine punishment:

16 But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, 17 until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. 18 Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. 19 How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! 20 Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms - Psalm 73:16-20

Yet, at the very point where he focused on the damned, he was reminded of that companion truth, which must be repeatedly and simultaneously held by and taught to both the sovereignly reprobate, and the by-grace regenerate, hearer:

23 Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. 24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. 27 For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. 28 But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works - Psalm 73:23-28

In the final analysis, glory awaits every true Christian, brought near to God and held in the hollow of His hand. In the face of both perplexity and despondency, the all-sufficient God, all by Himself, or with mercifully-bestowed sympathetic grace, is infinitely more than enough to quell anxiety in our hearts and firmly direct our heavenward steps. Certainly, without doubt, our weak hearts would give up, without the fortification of the Spirit-applied Word of God - the antidote for us, particularly when things seem bleak, is to get back to the Church and hungrily to taste and digest the means of grace.

So don't be afraid to correct, rebuke or resist those who want to just preach love and avoid the less-pleasant, dark, side of the Word - recommit to preach and support teaching of the Whole Counsel of God. Pray for all gainsayers, be patient with newborn babes, but be resolved to support those older saints who feel their hearts about to faint, and prescribe prophylactic antidotes of hellfire warning and heavenly yearning for all who come to listen, so that this present distress may not make them slide or lose their foot.

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