

“Because he will save his people from their sins” (Part Two)

Reflection 10 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

Sin is no one’s favorite topic, well, almost no one’s. The exceptions here are another kind of problem for another time, and probably beyond my skill set. But for most of us, we don’t like the topic of sin because the church over the centuries has obsessed over it. So, thank God, we have at least outgrown Hell – the traditional notion of a “loving” God who consigns millions, in fact, billions of people, to excruciating torment in Hell, unimaginable pain, blistering, peeling, broiling, baking in the fires of Hell, forever and ever and ever, torture beyond belief forever and ever and ever. And, yes, that is a diabolical notion that makes it all but impossible for many people to trust God. They can’t. It defies everything they know about love. It, in fact, makes nonsense of love.

So we have dismissed all notion of Hell which again is fun except the inconvenient truth that Jesus taught it. And, yes, we know that Gehenna, the Greek word for Hell in Scripture, was the name for the desolate Valley of Hinnom, the city garbage dump just outside the city of Jerusalem to the south, a place of unspeakable horror where once human sacrifices had been performed, now its fires always smoldering, its mounds of filth breeding maggots. And, yes, we know that two centuries before Jesus, Gehenna had become the apocalyptic stock-in-trade for the destiny of the wicked, and that Jesus picks up on this and says, “Yes, the fate of the wicked is, in fact, like that!”

In fact, we know this to be true. In our hearts, we know this to be true. All world scripture knows this to be true – even, I was amazed to find, Buddhist Scripture. So while I do not believe in traditional notions of Hell, I do believe in Hell. When Jesus spoke of it, he spoke truthfully – poetically, spiritually, and truthfully. He was saying justice will be done. What we do – or don’t do – matters. Our actions have consequences. Our words have consequences. How we live our lives will count forever. The universe is moral, and injustices will not stand. One day deceptions and personas will go up in smoke. Hypocrisy and self-absorbed fantasy will go up in smoke. “It is (as Hebrews 10:31 notes) a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” And all of this is true.

There is a kind of evil that a God who is love responds to with whatever force is necessary. Indeed, when we finally, fully understand what love really is, an almost seismic shift happens inside us when we come face to face with what is unloving. And we rise to meet it with all of our heart and all of our soul and all of our mind. So if we are still a long, long ways from a God who consigns millions, in fact, billions of people, to excruciating torment in Hell, torture beyond belief forever and ever and ever, we are still left with the reality of Hell and, in fact, the realization that many people while living live there already often due to the consequences of their sins.

And we are still left with the truth of accountability. Scripture calls it the Day of Judgment. Again traditional accounts of it may seem outdated, and they do, but the spiritual truth behind it never goes away. We will each one day come to terms with what

we have done and not done. Consider this. What if it were simply this – that a time comes when we get our feelings back? When we get our now desensitized feelings back? When we get our mindfulness back? When we see again? When we see the great opportunities we let slide right past us? When we see our indifference to the poor and the feeble, pathetic excuses we used to justify this? When we see the people we hurt intentionally but also unintentionally by our preoccupation with what we wanted? When we see the years we have wasted over matters that don't matter? When we see what we have done to our own children by our casual disregard for God and the things of the Spirit, how sometimes we have put our children before God and in so doing lost our children? When we see the ways in which we have let something other than God come to control us so that we could no longer say No to it and then became dysfunctional in all the other areas of our life? When our consciousness expands to see all that we have done and all that we have not done?

What greater “punishment” could there be? What stronger discipline? What wiser remediation? The absolute justice of it all – simply becoming mindful of all that we have done and all that we have not done, and the consequences of it all, maybe even the consequences of it all to the third and fourth generations! So the terms and focus and emphasis may change, but the truth still is that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And there are times in each of our lives – sooner or later – when in the dark nights of our souls we wonder what to do. How did I ever let it come to this! How will I ever live it down! How could I have not seen what was happening? How did I take my eyes so far off of God, and so far off of who I really am? Now where do I turn? What do I do about this? What do I do about me?

Now – not before, but now – maybe we can come to understand the goodness, the necessity, the wonder of Jesus being born so that he might save his people from their sins. His teaching, his life, his death, his resurrection, his church show us a better way. And through him, and what he taught, and how he lived, and how he died and rose again, we find forgiveness, mercy, grace, salvation. And together we find a way forward, not alone, only together, together in this quest for salvation, salvation for ourselves, for the generations to come, for those not at all like us, for our enemies, for the whole world.

God comes to us, remember, as Immanuel which means “God with us” (Matthew 1:22-23). Though you be skirting crisis, disaster, even Gehenna, God is with you. You are not alone. No one is alone. No one is alone. And this is an amazing reality. Immanuel is an astonishing truth: God with us! To worship this God. To sense his presence with us. To adore, to praise, to sing to this God, to be still and know this God, to encounter the presence of this God, to feel this transcendent power all around us and in us. Time becomes eternity. You touch the heavens. You come unstuck, free, flying, radiant, luminous, innocent again. You sense again the enchantment all around you, the joy, the freedom, the love. It's Immanuel, God with us, or as Paul says emphatically in his letter to the Colossians, it's Christ in you (1:27), not perfect behavior, not perfect doctrine. It's Christ in you, Christ in me. Amazing, if you just believe. Now you begin to sense what salvation really means, and why it matters.

– Dale Pauls