

Modern Theological Issues in the Church

Lesson 4 – The Afterlife

Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

Randy Thompson

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One of the most encouraging and hope inspiring doctrines in the Scriptures is the doctrine of heaven. Conversely, one of the most disturbing doctrines in the Scriptures is the doctrine of hell. The Scriptures, taken literally, portray a wonderful, blessed view of heaven and a horrific view of hell. Even with clear Scriptural teaching on hell, it is somewhat misunderstood. And in recent years gentler doctrines of hell have gained support among evangelicals.

Prologue

The Scriptures are clear that all people, without miraculous intervention – e.g. Enoch (Gen 5:24, Heb 11:5), Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), raptured believers (1 Thess 4:17), will taste death and judgment. This death is the end of physical life when the soul is separated from the body (James 2:26) with no loss of our consciousness (Luke 16:19-31; Rev 6:9-11).

²⁷And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this {comes} judgment, ²⁸so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without {reference to} sin, to those who eagerly await Him. Heb 9:27-28

²⁶For just as the body without {the} spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. James 2:26

The outcome of the judgment is based on acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior which is manifested in a changed life:

¹⁶"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷"For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. ¹⁸"He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. John 3:16-18

¹³"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. ¹⁴"For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it. ¹⁵"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶"You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn {bushes} nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷"So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸"A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹"Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰"So then, you will know them by their fruits. ²¹"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven {will enter.} ²²"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' ²³"And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' Matt 7:13-23

In the end there are two eternal (or final) states for all mankind: heaven or hell.

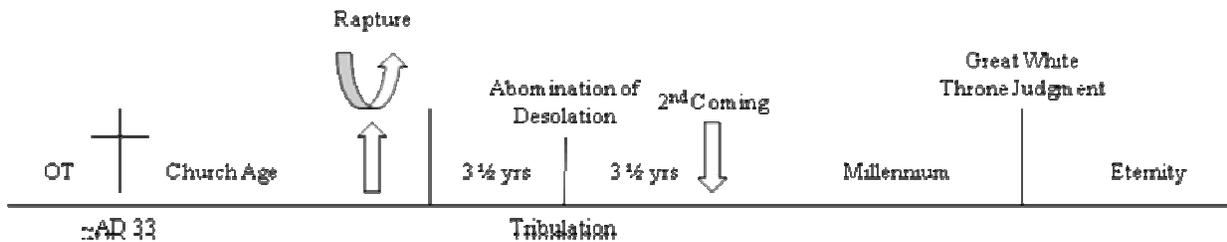
⁴⁶"These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Matt 25:46

²"Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace {and} everlasting contempt. Dan 12:2

All orthodox Christian theologians agree on the existence of two eternal destinies for all angels and human beings: heaven and hell. The Moody Handbook of Theology by Paul E. Enns

Eschatology Review

The return of Jesus is a prominent doctrine in Scripture. Evangelicals all hold that Christ will return, though they differ, sometimes significantly, on the details. The diagram below presents the premillennial second coming and pretribulational rapture position held by VBC.



The rapture is the event when the Lord will come in the air for His saints: the dead in Christ will be resurrected, living believers will be changed to their glorified state, and both will meet Christ to ascend to heaven (1 Thess 4:13-5:11; 1 Cor 15:51-57; John 14:1-3). The pretribulation rapture view holds that the rapture occurs before the seven year tribulation because: 1) the church is promised to be kept from the hour of trouble (Rev 3:10); 2) the restrainer (the Holy Spirit) will be removed requiring the removal of believers (2 Thess 2); 3) the wrath of God will be poured out in the tribulation and the church is exempt from wrath (Rev 6:17; cf. 1 Thess 1:10; 5:9); and 4) the rapture is imminent (1 Thess 5:6).

The tribulation is a seven year period (Dan 9:24-27) that begins when the Antichrist signs a seven year peace treaty with Israel (Dan 9:27) and ends with Christ's return at the battle of Armageddon. The tribulation is a time of judgment upon the unbelieving world (Jer 30:7; Dan 9:27; 12:1; 2 Thess 2:7-12; Rev. 6; 8-9; 16) and persecution of Israel (Matt 24:9; 22; Rev 12:17) by the Antichrist. A proposed chronology of the tribulation is:

Rapture (Unspecified Time)

Tribulation begins – Signing of a seven year peace treaty with Israel (Dan 9:27)

Seal 1 (Rev 6:1-2) – “Cold war”; Conquering by talking of peace and safety (1 Thess 5:3)

Seal 2 (Rev 6:3-4) – Open warfare

Seal 3 (Rev 6:5-6) – Famine

Seal 4 (Rev 6:7-8) – Death; 25% of the earth's population dies by war, famine, and wild beasts

Seal 5 (Rev 6:9-11) – Martyrdom of Tribulation Saints early in the Tribulation

Seal 6 (Rev 6:12-17) – Cosmic disturbances

Seal 7 (Rev 8:1-6) – Silence in heaven

Midpoint of the Tribulation – The Abomination of Desolation demands to be worshiped.

Trumpet 1 (Rev 8:7) – Destruction of vegetation

Trumpet 2 (Rev 8:8-9) – Destruction of seas

Trumpet 3 (Rev 8:10-11) – Destruction of fresh water

Trumpet 4 (Rev 8:12-13) – Destruction of celestial bodies (1/3 of sun, moon, and stars)

Trumpet 5 (Rev 9:1-12) – First Woe - Scorpion locusts to torment unbelievers for five months

Trumpet 6 (Rev 9:13-21) – Second Woe – 1/3 of the earth's population killed by a demon army

Trumpet 7 (Rev 11:15-19) – Third Woe – The end is near – The bowl judgments

Bowl 1 (Rev 16:2) – Open sores on unbelievers

Bowl 2 (Rev 16:3) – Sea turned to blood and all sea creatures die

Bowl 3 (Rev 16:4-7) – Fresh water turned to blood

Bowl 4 (Rev 16:8-9) – Sun scorches men

Bowl 5 (Rev 16:10-11) – Antichrist's kingdom is filled with darkness

Bowl 6 (Rev 16:12-16) – Euphrates River dried up

Bowl 7 (Rev 16:17-21) – Earthquake and hailstones

The battle of Armageddon

Jesus the Christ returns

The millennial kingdom is Christ's foretold messianic kingdom when He will reign on the earth for one thousand years (Rev 20:1-7). During this time the resurrected saints will reign with Christ over Israel and all the nations of the earth (Ezek 37:21-28; Dan 7:17-22; Rev 19:11-16). The living believers at the end of the tribulation will be those who populate the millennial kingdom. The kingdom will be characterized by harmony, justice, peace, righteousness, and long life (Isa 11; 65:17-25; Ezek 36:33-38). Satan will be bound for the duration of the millennium and released at the end for a final confrontation with Christ where he will be cast into the lake of fire (Rev 20:1-10).

All those who have sinned are to come under judgment:

Believers will be judged after the after the rapture according to their works done since the time of salvation (1 Cor 3:11-15; 2 Cor 5:10). This is the judgment seat of Christ.

Old Testament believers will probably be judged at the end of the tribulation (Dan 12:1-3).

The Gentiles living when Christ returns to set up His kingdom will be judged with the believers entering the kingdom and the unbelievers being cast into the lake of fire (Matt 25:31-46; Joel 3:2).

Israel will be judged at the second coming based on their acceptance of the Messiah. The saved will enter the kingdom and the unsaved will be cast into the lake fire (Ezek 20:37-38).

The fallen angels will be judged probably after the millennium and be cast into the lake of fire (Matt 25:41; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6; 1 Rev 20:10).

All the unsaved dead will be judged after the millennium before the Great White Throne and be cast into the lake of fire (Rev 20:11-15).

There are two general categories of resurrections: the first resurrection (resurrection of the just or resurrection of life) and the second resurrection (resurrection of the unjust or resurrection of condemnation). The first resurrection includes the dead in Christ who are raised at the rapture (1 Thess 4:16), the tribulation martyrs (Rev 20:4-5), and the Old Testament saints (Dan 12:2) at either the rapture or the second coming. The second resurrection will include the unsaved dead of all time and will occur at the Great White Throne judgment (Rev 20:11-15).

After the rapture, tribulation, second coming, millennium, and Great White Throne judgment the eternal state will be ushered in (Rev 21). The current universe will be destroyed with intense heat (2 Pet 3:10) and replaced with a new earth (Rev 21:1). The new Jerusalem (Rev 21:2) will come down out of heaven and be the dwelling place of the saints (Rev 21-22). The focus of the eternal state is the fellowship of the redeemed with their Creator (Rev 21:3-4; 22-27; Rev 22: 1-5).

Intermediate State

Upon death all people enter what theologians have named the "Intermediate State". This is the period between a person's physical death and their resurrection. The intermediate state of three groups of people is identified: NT believers, the unsaved (both OT and NT), and OT believers. First we must define some terms:

Sheol: Hebrew word for the abode of the dead – both grave and afterlife. Used 66 times in the OT.

Hades: The New Testament equivalent of sheol, used 10 times in the NT. This is also the Greek translation of the Hebrew sheol in the Septuagint. This is "pre-hell", a temporary place of torment of the wicked that will be thrown into the lake of fire at the Great White Throne Judgment.

The Intermediate State of NT Believers

Paul equates being absent from the body with being present with the Lord (2 Cor 5:1-10; Phil 1:19-26). Since Christ was raised to be seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly realms (Eph 1:20), believers can expect to enter His presence in heaven upon death. The bodies of NT believers will be resurrected at the rapture (1 Thess 4:16) while the bodies of OT believers will evidently be raised at the end of the great tribulation (Dan 12:2; Rev 20:4), and all will return to earth with Christ at the second coming.

⁶Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight—⁸we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be **absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord**.⁹Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. 2 Cor 5:6-9 (emphasis added)

The Intermediate State of the Unsaved (both OT and NT)

When the unsaved die, their immaterial nature goes to sheol (the OT term) or hades (the Greek equivalent of sheol, used in the NT) to wait for the resurrection of the body at the end of the millennium. The souls of the ungodly are outside the body in hades and the body is resurrected at the Great White Throne Judgment and will be cast into the lake of fire (Rev 20:11-15).

¹⁹“Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. ²⁰“And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, ²¹and longing to be fed with the *crumbs* which were falling from the rich man’s table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. ²²“Now the poor man died and was carried away **by the angels to Abraham’s bosom**; and the rich man also died and was buried. ²³“**In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment**, and saw *** Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom**. ²⁴“And he cried out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.’ ²⁵“But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶“And besides all this, between us and you there is a great **chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us**.’ ²⁷“And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father’s house—²⁸for I have five brothers—in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ ²⁹“But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰“But he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!’ ³¹“But he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.’” Luke 16:19-31

The Intermediate State of Old Testament Believers

The lack of direct Scriptural teaching on the intermediate state of believers during the OT has led to much speculation. What can be determined is based on a few key verses and an attempt to systematize all of Scripture on the subject. Most likely OT believers went directly to heaven. When Moses and Elijah appeared at the transfiguration they appeared in glory (Luke 9:31).

²⁹And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing *became* white and gleaming. ³⁰And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, ³¹who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Luke 9:29-31

False Ideas of the Final State

Universalism: The liberal belief that all people will make it to heaven. Universalists usually have a low view of Scripture and argue more from God's nature of love than from Biblical evidence. Biblical evidence includes passages which express desire for all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4; John 12:32; 2 Pet 3:9). Of course many other verses show that because of man's rebellion, God's desire is unrealized (John 3:36; Matt 25:46; 2 Thess 1:8-9; 1 Cor 1:18; 4:3; Heb 2:3). In fact, it is the few and not the many that gain eternal life (Matt 7:13-14).

Annihilationism: The belief that the punishment of the wicked is everlasting in consequence not in duration and people in hell will eventually be annihilated. This view is held by few evangelicals, but has been gaining ground in recent years. Annihilationism teaches that man is created immortal and fulfills his destiny in salvation, while the wicked cease to exist either by direct act of God or by the corrosive effect of evil. Biblical passages used to defend this view speak to the death of the wicked (Rom 6:23; James 5:20; Rev 20:14), destruction (Matt 7:13; 10:28; 1 Thess 1:9), and perishing (John 3:16). Other arguments say it is inconsistent with God's love to torment His creatures forever.

However, many other verses use the term "forever" or "everlasting" in regard to the punishment of the wicked (Isa 33:14; Jer 17:4; Dan 12:2; Matt 18:8; 25:41, 46; 2 Thess 1:9; Jude 6-7; Rev 14:11; 19:3; 20:10). Also, expressions such as "fire unquenchable" (Isa 66:24; Matt 3:12; Luke 3:17; Mark 9:43-45) speak to an eternal punishment and not a cessation of existence. Spiritual death does not mean that the soul becomes a non-being, but that it is totally deprived of the presence of God, which is the essential condition of worthwhile existence (cf. 2 Thess 1:9).

Conditional Immortality: The belief that humans are naturally mortal and God imparts to the redeemed the gift of immortality, allowing the rest of humanity to cease to exist. The difference then between annihilationism and conditional immortality is that the first believes that all are created eternal and the unsaved will cease to exist and the latter believes that all are created temporal and the only the saved will be given eternal life.

In addition to the verses used by annihilationists, the primary biblical text for conditional immortality is 1 Tim 6:16, which teaches that only God is immortal (and therefore humans are not). However, God has other attributes that are based upon Him alone that He has imparted to man, for example wisdom (Rom 16:27). The conditionalist believes that God gives immortality to the saved. There is no biblical evidence that God has created humans to exist temporarily. As demonstrated, there is abundant evidence that the redeemed will enjoy eternal life and the unredeemed will suffer eternal destruction.

Second-chance View: The belief that many who are punished in hell will eventually be redeemed. This view is held by few evangelicals.

Purgatorial View: The belief that there is a place of retribution where people who died without mortal sin go. This view is held by Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that only those who leave this life in a state of perfection go directly to heaven. Those who have died in a state of wickedness go directly to hell. There is also a large number who do not fall into these two groups and go to an intermediate holding place. Under Catholicism there are two intermediate holding places:

a. Limbo

Limbo is for unbaptized infants. Because of original sin, which can only be removed by baptism, these infants cannot enter the presence of God. However, these infants only suffer punishment for original sin, not for actual sins committed. In addition, there is a limbo for Old Testament believers. When Christ died, He descended into sheol and delivered these believers from their captivity and this limbo is now empty.

b. Purgatory

Purgatory, according to Catholic theologian Joseph Pohle is: "a state of temporary punishment for those who, departing this life in the grace of God, are not entirely free from venial sins or have not yet fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions."

The primary support for the doctrine of purgatory is 2 Maccabees 12:43-45 (an apocryphal book added to the Catholic Bible in the 16th century), which speaks of Judas Maccabaeus making atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin: "He [Judas Maccabaeus] levied a contribution from each man, and sent the total of two thousand silver drachmas to Jerusalem for a sin-offering -- a fit and proper act in which he took due account of the resurrection. For if he had not been expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been foolish and superfluous to pray for the dead. But since he had in view the wonderful reward reserved for those who die a godly death, his purpose was a holy and pious one. And this was why he offered an atoning sacrifice to free the dead from their sin."

Also, Matt 12:32 is cited, where Jesus says, "But whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come." However, 2 Maccabees is not accepted as Scripture by Protestants and was only accepted as canonical by the Roman Catholics in 1548. To base a doctrine on 2 Maccabees is highly questionable. Also, Matt 12:32 does not teach that some sins will only be forgiven in the age to come. It only teaches that sin against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. Most importantly, the doctrine of purgatory implies a salvation by works. It is Christ's death alone that forgives and atones for sin. No amount of suffering on our part is required.

Metaphorical View: The belief that biblical descriptions of hell such as fire and darkness should not be taken literally. Hell is viewed as a place of conscious suffering beyond our imagination. Held by some evangelicals.

Literal View: The belief that hell is a literal place of eternal fire that neither consumes the resurrected body nor the soul.

Description of Hell

Thus far, we have seen that there is an intermediate state for the unsaved in hades. This is not "hell". Hell is the final place of punishment for the unsaved. It is used 12 times in the NT and translates two words in the NT: gehenna and tartoo. Both refer to the final everlasting punishment of the wicked. The Scriptures describe hell as:

Darkness / Place of Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth

¹¹"I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline {at the table} with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; ¹²but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the **outer darkness**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Matt 8:11-12

¹³"Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the **outer darkness**; in that place there will be **weeping and gnashing of teeth.**' Matt 22:13

⁵¹and will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; in that place there will be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**. Matt 24:51

Furnace of Fire

⁴⁹"So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, ⁵⁰and will throw them into the **furnace of fire**; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matt 13:49-50

Unquenchable Fire

¹⁷"His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with **unquenchable fire**." Luke 3:17

Everlasting Torment

⁹Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, ¹⁰he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. ¹¹"And the smoke of their **torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night**, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name." Rev 4:9-11

Separation from God

⁹These will pay the penalty of **eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power**, 2 Thess 1:9

Lake of Fire

⁸"But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part {will be} in the **lake that burns with fire and brimstone**, which is the second death." Rev 12:9

¹²And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is {the book} of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. ¹³And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one {of them} according to their deeds. ¹⁴Then death and Hades were thrown into the **lake of fire**. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, **he was thrown into the lake of fire**. Rev 20:12-15

Other terms such as "unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12; Mark 9:43, 48), "furnace of fire" (Matt. 13:42, 50), "outer darkness" (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30), "eternal fire" (Matt. 25:41), "the lake that burns with fire and brimstone" (Rev. 21:8), and "lake of fire" (Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15) are used to describe eternal punishment. Unbelievers will be cast into the lake of fire at the great white throne judgment (Rev. 20:11-15) and there they will live in torment for eternity. The Moody Handbook of Theology by Paul E. Enns

Description of Heaven

The believer's citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20), it is where we long to be (2 Cor 5:8). Believers immediately go to God's presence upon death (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23; 1 Thess 4:14).

We will not be alone in heaven:

²²But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, ²³to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of {the} righteous made perfect, ²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than {the blood} of Abel. Heb 12:22-24

Heaven will be a place of personal intimate fellowship with God:

³And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, Rev 21:3

We will have fullness of joy in heaven:

¹¹You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever. Psa 16:11

Heaven will be a place where the ravages of sin which we now endure will be whipped away – tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain:

⁴and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be {any} death; there will no longer be {any} mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." Rev 21:4

We will be busy worshipping God:

¹⁴I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵"For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. ¹⁶"They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; ¹⁷for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes." Rev 7:14-17

We will have full knowledge of God in heaven:

¹²For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. 1 Cor 13:12

Conclusion

Those that have trusted Jesus Christ alone for their eternal salvation will spend eternity in God's presence. Those who have not will spend eternity separated from God in eternal torment. This should motivate us to more actively share the gospel with those that are hell-bound.