

What Will Make Hell Hell

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Sin alienates us from God, and those who insist on remaining alienated are destined for a realm of eternal torment. Jesus spoke of hell as a place where “their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mk. 9:44). Most people recoil from the very idea of unending pain so extreme. But even in this life “pain” means more than one thing, and the anguish we can feel in our minds is often worse than any hurt we can suffer physically. Whatever pain hell may involve that corresponds to physical suffering right now, the thing that will be even worse — the thing that will truly make hell hell — is the torment that will come from having characters that are completely corrupt and vile.

If we refuse to let God redeem us and purge our sinful traits, those traits will grow more and more evil until, in hell, we will have become individuals in whom evil has reached its final degree. Just as those who go to heaven will have been perfected in righteousness and will have lost every trace of evil, if we go to hell just the opposite will be true: we will have lost every trace of goodness. But the process begins in this life. If we make choices that conform our minds to darkness, we turn ourselves into persons who think and act like Satan rather than God. Ultimately, we will find ourselves having become the opposite of everything a being in God’s image was meant to be, fit only to be banished from His presence. In hell, our characters will have totally disintegrated.

Think of it this way: hell will be inhabited by those who have grown away from God, the very essence of whose character is love. If we are so foolish as to reject the transforming power of the gospel, in hell we will have lost every attribute of character that comes from love. These qualities are listed in 1 Cor. 13:4-8. If you wish to imagine the horror of hell, simply run down the list of love’s attributes, imagine possessing not even a tiny vestige of any one of them, and then contemplate, not just the torment of being surrounded by people like that, but the wretched agony of being that way yourself.

Space does not permit us to discuss all of the characteristics of love in 1 Cor. 13, but a few will illustrate the point. Love, for example, “suffers long.” It patiently endures hardship, insult, and injury; it is forbearing and magnanimous. In hell, however, there will be no love at all, and hence no forbearance. There will be nothing to keep us from being consumed by vengeful intolerance. In addition, love “is not provoked.” It does not irritably lose its temper. In the absence of love, hell will be a place where we will have become uncontrollably peevish and wrathful. What is more, love “thinks no evil.” It does not hold grudges or nurse its wrath to keep it warm. But there will be no love in hell, and there we will have become filled with smoldering hatred for every slight we ever suffered.

Consider a few more. Love “rejoices in the truth”. It is glad when truth is glad and happy

when evil suspicions are proved unfounded. In hell, however, we will be wracked by a torment of rage at the thought that goodness and right have been victorious. Love “believes all things.” It is always ready to trust, and eager to believe the best. In hell we will be eaten up by sneering cynicism. Love “hopes all things.” It regards no one or nothing as hopeless. In hell we will have become lost in utter, hopeless despair. And then, love “endures all things.” Nothing can happen that can break love’s spirit. But in hell, without the endurance imparted by love, we will be completely broken by discouragement and defeat.

What it comes down to is this: the thing that will make heaven heaven will be totally, irreversibly absent from hell. Heaven’s joy will come from God’s character and the good things that flow from it (cf. Jn. 17:3). God’s character is one of love, and love is active goodwill toward other beings (1 Jn. 4:7-11). But in hell, love and its influence will be gone forever. There will be nothing but a writhing mass of beings who have turned so completely inward — beings whose selfishness has become such a total obsession — that there is nothing for them but to gnaw away miserably at the bone of self throughout eternity.

We have to admit (if we are honest) that, even now, most of the real unpleasantness we suffer is the consequence of sinful flaws in our own character. Bad attitudes produce consequences that make us miserable. It is that simple. Self-centered people are unhappy people; jealousy, spitefulness, hatred, etc. make us miserable. But in the here and now, we are never as miserable as it is possible to be. As bad as it gets, the pain is always mitigated by some remnant of goodness within us, and we get the benefit of an environment in which there is still some goodness in those around us. In hell, however, there will be no such remnants. There will be nothing to keep the wretchedness of sin from being as painful as it is possible to be.

Each of us is growing a character that will one day be “perfected” — in hell if not in heaven. The bliss of heaven and the agony of hell are not arbitrary rewards and punishments; they are the natural outgrowths — indeed, the inevitable consequences — of growth toward the character of God on the one hand, and growth toward the character of Satan on the other. If when we examine our hearts we see a little irritability, a touch of resentment, a tendency toward intolerance, or any such thing, we need to be have our eyes opened concerning where these little “foibles” come from and where they will take us: they come straight out of hell, and if they are not cut out of our character by the Great Physician, they will take us to be forever with the evil one whose nature we have come to share.

We may think we have plenty of time to arrest the growth of these worrisome character flaws, to stop them from finally destroying us. But make no mistake. These are not trifles. They are soul-destroying sins. Self-centeredness, the very antithesis of everything God is about, is nothing less than the essence of Satan’s character. It is evil

in its purest form — the cancer of which all other sins are merely symptoms — and the suffering it inflicts in this life is as nothing compared to what is in store for us if we go to hell.

What do we see in our own hearts? Where is our “father”: above or below? Depending on what the answer really is, our lives at present are a foretaste either of heaven or hell. Which is it? There is no in-between. The only alternative to becoming “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pt. 1:4) is to be taken to hell by selfish sins that were allowed to bloom and to bear their bitter fruit. Salvation requires more than being baptized and attending worship services. It requires beholding the “glory of the Lord,” allowing Him to strip the filth out of our hearts, that we might be “transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).