

J.C. Ryle:

When a house is on fire, what ought to be done first? We ought to give the alarm and wake the inhabitants. This is true love to our neighbor. this is true charity. Reader, I love your soul, and want it to be saved. I am therefore going to tell you something about hell. There is such a place as hell. Let no one deceive you with vain words. What men do not like, they try hard not to believe. When the Lord Jesus Christ comes to judge the world, he will punish all who are not his disciples with a fearful punishment. All who are found impenitent and unbelieving; all who have clung to sin, stuck to the world, and set their affections on things below; all who are without Christ; all such shall come to an awful end. Whosoever is not written in the book of life shall be "cast into the lake of fire." Rev 20:15.

The punishment of hell shall be most severe. There is no pain like that of burning. Put your finger in the candle for a moment if you doubt this, and try. Fire is the most destructive and devouring of all elements. Look into the mouth of a blast furnace, and think what it would be to be there. Fire is of all elements most opposed to life. Creatures can live in air, and earth, and water; but nothing can live in fire. Yet fire is the portion to which the Christless and unbelieving will come. they will be "cast into the lake of fire." The punishment of hell will be eternal. Millions of ages will pass away, and the fire will never burn low and become dim. The fuel of that fire will never waste away and be consumed. it is "unquenchable fire." O reader, these are the sad and painful things to speak of. I have no-pleasure in dwelling on them. I could rather say with the apostle Paul, "I have great sorrow." But they are things written for our learning, and it is good to consider them. They are part of that Scripture which is all profitable, and they ought to be heard. Painful as the subject of hell is, it is one about which I dare not, cannot, and must not be silent.

Who would desire to speak of hell-fire if God has not spoken of it? When God has spoken of it so plainly, who can safely hold his peace? I dare not shut my eyes to the fact, that a deep rooted infidelity lurks in men's minds on the subject of hell. I see it oozing out in the utter apathy of some: they eat, and drink, and sleep, as if there was no wrath to come. I see it creeping forth in the coldness others about their neighbor's souls: they show little anxiety to awaken the unconverted, and pluck brands from the fire. I desire to denounce such infidelity with all my might. Believing that there are "terrors of the Lord," as well as the "recompense of reward."

I call on all who profess to believe the Bible, to be on their guard. I know that some do not believe there is any hell at all. They think it impossible there can be such a place. They call it inconsistent with the mercy of God. They say it is too awful an idea to be really true. The devil of course, rejoices in the views of such people. They help his kingdom mightily. They are preaching up his old favorite doctrine, "Ye shall not surely die." I know furthermore, that some do not believe that hell is eternal. They tell us it is incredible that a compassionate God will punish men for ever. He will surely open the prison doors at last. This also is a mighty help to the devil's cause. "Take your ease, "he whispers to sinners-" if you do make a mistake, never mind, it is not for ever." I know also that some believe there is a hell, but never allow that anybody is going there. All people with them are good, as soon as they die, all were sincere, all meant well, and all, they hope, got to heaven. Alas! what a common delusion is this! I can well understand the feeling of the little girl who asked her mother where all the wicked people were buried, for she found no mention on the gravestones of any except of the good.

And I know very well that some believe there is a hell, but never like to hear it spoken of. It is a subject that should always be kept back, in their opinion. They see no profit in bringing it forward, and are rather shocked when it is mentioned. This also is an immense help to the devil. "Hush! hush!" says Satan, "say nothing about hell." The fowler wishes no noise to be made when he has laid his, snares. The wolf would like the shepherd to sleep, while he prowls round the fold. The devil rejoices when Christians are silent about hell. reader, all these notions are the opinions of man. What is it to you and me what man thinks of religion? Man will not judge us at the last day. There is but one point to be settled, "what says the word of God?" do you believe the Bible? Then depend upon it, hell is real and true. it is as true as heaven, as true as justification by faith, as true as the fact that Christ died upon the cross. There is not a fact or doctrine which you may not lawfully doubt, if you doubt hell. Disbelieve hell, you unscrew, unsettle, and unpin everything in the Scripture. You may as well throw your Bible aside at once. From "no hell" to "no God" is but a series of steps. Do you believe the Bible? Then depend upon it, hell will have inhabitants. The wicked shall certainly be turned into hell, and all the people that forget God. The same blessed Saviour who now sits on a throne of grace, will one day sit on a throne of judgement, and men will see there is such a thing as "the wrath of the Lamb." The same, lips which now say, Come, come unto me," will one day say, "Depart, ye cursed" Alas! how awful the thought of being condemned by Christ himself, judge by the Saviour, sentenced to misery by the lamb! Do you believe the Bible? Then depend upon it, hell will be intense and inalterable woe.

It is vain to talk of all the expressions about it being figures of speech, the pit, the prison, the worm, the fire, the thirst, the blackness, the darkness, the weeping, the gnashing of teeth, the second death, all these may be figures of speech if you please. But Bible figures mean something beyond all questions, and here they mean something which man's mind can never fully conceive. O reader, the miseries of mind and conscience are far worse than those of the body. The whole extent of hell, the present suffering, the bitter recollection of the past, the hopeless prospect of the future, will never be thoroughly known except by those who go there.

Do you believe the Bible? Then depend upon it, hell is eternal. It must be eternal, or words have no meaning at all. "For ever and ever," "everlasting," "unquenchable," "never-dying" all these are expressions used about hell, and expressions that cannot be explained away. It must be eternal, or the very foundations of heaven are cast down. If hell has an end, heaven has an end too. They both stand or fall together. It must be eternal, or every doctrine of the gospel is undermined. If a man may escape hell at length without faith in Christ, or sanctification of the Spirit, sin is no longer an infinite evil, and there was no such great need of Christ's making an atonement. And where is the warrant for saying that hell can ever change a heart, or make it fit for heaven? It must be eternal, or hell would cease to be hell altogether. Give a man hope, and he will bear any thing. Grant a hope of deliverance, however distant, and hell is but a drop of water.

Alas! for that day which will have no tomorrow - that day when men shall seek death and not find it, and shall desire to die but death shall flee from them! Do you believe the Bible? Then depend upon it, hell is a subject that ought not to be kept back. It is striking, to observe that none say so much about it as our Lord Jesus Christ, that gracious and merciful Saviour, and the apostle John, whose heart seems full of love. Truly it may well be doubted whether we ministers speak of it as much as we ought. I cannot forget the words of a dying hearer of Mr. Newton: "Sir, you often told me of Christ and salvation: why did you not remind me of hell and danger?" Let others hold their peace about hell if they will; I dare not do so. I see it plainly in Scripture, and I must speak of it. I fear that thousands are on the broad, way that leads to it, and I would fain arouse them to a sense of the peril before them.

What would you say of the man who saw his neighbor's house in danger of being burned down, and never raised the cry of "fire?" What ought to be said of us as ministers if we call ourselves watchmen for souls, and yet see fires of hell raging in distance, and never give the alarm?

Call it bad taste, if you like, to speak of hell. Call it charity to make things pleasant, and speak of smoothly, and soothe men with constant lullaby of peace. I have not read my Bible. My notion of charity is to warn men plainly of danger. My notion of taste in the ministerial office, is to declare all the counsel of God.

If I never spoke of hell, I should think I had kept back something that was profitable, and should look on myself as an accomplice of the devil. Reader, I beseech you, in all tender affection, beware of false views of the subject on which I have been dwelling. Beware of new and strange doctrines about hell and the eternity of punishment. Beware of manufacturing a God of your own: a God who is all mercy, but not just; a God who is all love, but not holy; a God who as a heaven for every body, but a hell for none; a God who can allow good and bad to be side by side in time, but will make no distinction between good and bad in eternity. Such a God is an idol of your won, as truly an idol as any snake or crocodile in an Egyptian temple. The hands of your won fancy and sentimentality have made him. He is not the God of the Bible, and beside the God of the Bible there is no God at all.

Your heaven would be no heaven at all. A heaven containing all sorts of characters indiscriminately would be miserable discord indeed. Alas! for the eternity of such a heaven. There would be little difference between it and hell. Ah! reader, there is a hell! There is a fire! Take heed lest you find it out to your cost too late. Beware of being wise above that which is written. Beware of forming fanciful theories of your own, and then trying to make the Bible square with them. Beware of making selections from your Bible to suit your taste. Dare not to say, "I believe this verse, for I like it. I refuse that, for I cannot reconcile it with my views." Nay! but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? By what right do you talk in this way? Surely it were better to say, over every chapter in the word, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth." Ah! if men would do this, they would never deny the unquenchable fire.