

Introduction

What if the traditional Christian view of hell is true? What if every person who does not believe in Jesus Christ will spend eternity weeping and gnashing their teeth? What if your great grandmother is writhing in pain right now? What if she still will be in that same unimaginable anguish one billion years from today? What is a billion years anyway? What is eternity?

If the traditional Christian view of hell—that it entails eternal torment for all non-Christians—is true, then it seems to me that we Christians would act differently today.

Compare this with watching your neighborhood burn to the ground. If you really believed that a huge fire was about to consume your neighborhood, you would do something to help immediately. You would call the fire department, yell out to warn your neighbors, or actually do something heroic to try to save them. To sit by inactively and watch would be irresponsible, cruel, and even evil.

A fire in the neighborhood is insignificant compared with what traditional Christians say they believe about hell—millions and millions of people forever weeping and gnashing their teeth. If you truly believed that after a billion years of agony they will only have begun their suffering, then you had better get busy. In fact, you should not be wasting time relaxing, eating, sleeping, or reading this book. If hell

Hell: God's Justice, God's Mercy

is forever pain, and you have the answers for people, then you had better spend every waking moment of the rest of your life warning others.

Of course, there are some evangelists who frequently remind themselves of hell's future torment. Indeed, that vision helps motivate them to carry on with their work, and I am grateful for what they do. I, too, spend much time in evangelistic work. But even the most aggressive evangelists do not give every moment to warning people. Even they live inconsistently with the traditional view of hell.

I can't live my life with such inconsistency. It is too hard to embrace the Church's traditional teaching about hell and still live a normal life. How can I work, mow my lawn, or raise my children if most of the world is headed toward such an eternity? I can't do it, and I don't see any other Christians capable of living with that awareness either. They go on vacations. They relax in front of the television. They laugh and have good times. They may say that they believe in hell, but none of them seems to *really* believe.

If they really believed, they would not only be compulsive evangelists, but they would also have to live with a consciousness that the God they serve will keep millions of people alive while subjecting them to the most heinous torture. How can a Christian conceive of such a God? Is that the same God Who is revealed in Jesus Christ?

For many years I accepted the traditional doctrine of hell. Today I believe hell exists, but I no longer believe in the doctrine as it is taught by the traditional Church. I am someone who cannot

pretend, believing in one doctrine while living my daily life inconsistent with that doctrine. I can't sit still or sleep at night until I have resolved such conflicts. So I have studied the Bible (and especially the words of our Lord Jesus) carefully enough to develop some beliefs that—to me—are believable. Please let me explain.