

August 27, 2023

Matthew 16:13-20

“Hell Shall Not Prevail!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Johann Gerhard, one of the most important Lutheran theologians following the Reformation, wrote a book called *Sacred Meditations*. Some people despise that book today because it is incredibly intense with Biblical truths that we don't want to hear. Meditation 49 is titled "*The Severity of Future Punishment*." It is far too long for me to read the whole thing and so I will only read selected portions:

Meditate, O devout soul, upon the awfulness of future punishment ... There, in that world of woe, shall be the heat of fire and the rigor of cold; perpetual darkness ... torment arising forever ... weeping and wailing forever and ever ... unquenchable thirst ... the worm that does not die ... a horrible terror, pains unspeakable, and shame and confusion of face as they stand with the black record of their sins unfolded before them; envy, hatred, sorrow, eternal exclusion from the beatific vision of God, with no ray of hope to cheer the awful gloom of that place of unending torment.

I definitely do not want to go to hell. I assume that you feel the same way. Because we are sinful people we don't even want to believe that it is real. But the voice of an evil conscience knows that holiness and unholiness cannot go together. The voice of a good conscience cries out to avoid all things that destroy our loving relationship with God, for we know that without him all is lost. In the face of the horror of an eternity without God we must understand it in a way that we can. It is folly to think that one can force someone to love another and be with them when they do not want to be there. Love and hate don't mix.

Good and evil cannot go together. Those who have chosen the path of unrighteousness have no excuse, as they are only receiving what they themselves have desired instead of God. They love the creation rather than the Creator, and they bend everything in the creation to satisfy their love for self. They chase after a life without the loving principles that govern a right relationship with the true God and fashion a god of their own. John writes in his first epistle: "[They love] the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life ... (2:16)." So, what is now, is passing away, and those who love the corrupted now, cannot be permitted to enter into the new, for what is new and perfect will forever leave behind the now.

The context of our gospel lesson for this morning is a place. It was called Caesarea Philippi. It is mentioned for a reason. This place may not mean much to us who are living in a different time, but in the days of Jesus it would be like mentioning San Francisco or Las Vegas or New Orleans. Despite the fact that all three of those places have their good points, they all have an unseemly reputation for wickedness. Well, Caesarea Philippi was a city dominated by immoral activities and pagan worship.

There was a cave and spring at Caesarea Philippi that was considered to be the gates to hades or to the underworld, which we as Christians would call hell. To make a long story short, this was the place where fertility gods lived during the winter and returned to earth during the spring. The main god of the cave was Pan who looked like a man and a goat. They used these silly ideas to excuse their sin. In order to entice the return of Pan each spring the people of Caesarea Philippi engaged in horrible and unspeakable deeds of immorality that were masked as worship.

This is the context of our Gospel lesson. And Jesus is making a powerful point to his disciples and us by taking them there and recording this account for you and me. Jesus asks his disciples, and he is asking you and me:

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah [son of Jonah]! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Who is Jesus? The answer to this question gets to the heart of the Christian faith. He is the Savior who became flesh for us to absorb into himself our sin with the purpose of ultimately and permanently removing it from us, and removing us from this sinful world. He rose from the dead so that what is now corrupted may one day become incorruptible. This Jesus came into this fallen, unbelieving world to overcome sin, death, and hell. He came to forgive all sin and thereby remove us from the hell that we deserve so that we might be with him forever in heaven. He did not go to the cross so that we may love and embrace Caesarea Philippi and the gates of hell. Rather, he came to rescue us from Caesarea Philippi and keep the gates of hell from prevailing against us, the church.

And still people are clamoring to get into hell as evidenced by their love for sin and their ongoing pursuit to practice every sort of wickedness imaginable. Obviously, and even we as Christians experience this, the devil has made the gates of hell very attractive with all of their enticements and false promises. Who among us with the sinful flesh finds the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:29-31 easy? He says: “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.” Or, consider these words of our Lord and Savior in Matthew 10:38-39, “... whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Who is Jesus to you? Is he your Savior from sin so that you can sin all the more? Or is he the Christ, the Son of the living God, he who has come into this world to rescue us from sin and one day put an end to it? In him **Hell Shall Not Prevail!**

Jesus has commissioned his church with a gigantic task in our gospel lesson. The disciples and his church are to stand before the gates of hell to confess who Jesus is and all that he has done at the cross and empty tomb. The church and her ministers have been given the key to unlock the very doors of heaven for all who confess their sins. And the church and her ministers have been given the key to lock the very doors of heaven to all who love and practice sin - to keep hell out. And this she does whenever she proclaims the forgiveness of sins or, for that matter, the law which shows sin, and also condemns and punishes.

Like the disciples we are confronted with a society that is embracing the gates of hell. While all that is false, promises prosperity and happiness, we must proclaim that these are lies and that the devil cannot deliver. To do that means that our life down here will not be easy. Thus, we must be alert and engaged so that we do not hide our faith because of embarrassment and fear, but take to heart the words of our Jesus: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” All our power lies here with the keys given to us by Jesus in the means of grace. And if we hold on to these, and exercise them, **Hell Shall Not Prevail!**

The Keys are a precious gift because they apply Christ’s forgiveness, and give us the strength to prevail and even to proclaim to others, both publicly and privately, forgiveness of sin, life, and heaven to this unbelieving world that is embracing the gates of hell. It is our prayer that many will be rescued so that the gates will not prevail against them either. And what shall we all expect at the gates of heaven, for all those (as it says in Revelation 22:14) who have washed their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates?

Meditation 47 of *Sacred Meditations* is titled “*The Beatific Vision of God in Heaven.*” These words are also intense but, in this case, they are most wonderful words we need to hear. Gerhard writes:

O the unspeakable blessedness of that time, when the Adorable Trinity shall be the completion of all our desires, whom we shall forevermore behold, whom we shall never cease to love, and whom we shall unweariedly praise through endless ages. To see God - ah! that will surpass all the joys of earth. To gaze on the face of Christ, to live with Christ, to hear the voice of Christ, will far exceed the most ardent desires of our hearts. O Lord Jesus, You most blessed Spouse of my soul, when will You bring my soul into Your royal palace as Your honored bride? What can I want there that You will not supply? What more can we desire or look for when God Himself shall be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28)? Oh, that will be as beauty to my sight, honey to my taste, music to my ear, balm to my nostrils, and a flower to my touch. God will be all in all, and will distribute the blessings of His kingdom to each one according to his heart’s desire.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott