

Hell and the gospel

Part 1 – To those who fear hell

Jesus makes what look like eternally damning statements to his fellow Jews - like **Luke 13:28** where he says, “There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, **but you yourselves thrown out.**”

Those are harsh words. He had other harsh words to say too, like **Luke 13:3**, where he’s addressing the whole Jewish nation when he says, “unless you repent, you too will all perish,” and “the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” **Matthew 8:12**. He also talks to his fellow Jews of the “broad road that leads to destruction,” **Matthew 7:13-14**, and of many being called but few chosen in **Matthew 22:14**. He tells of the door being shut to the five foolish virgins, **Matthew 25:10-12**, and of the unfruitful person being “cut down and thrown into the fire” in **Matthew 7:19**.

Jesus was very angry, especially at the Jewish leaders, and he expressed his anger openly in statements like, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” in **Matthew 7:23**. Some Christians take this to mean that many Jews, the Pharisees in particular, lost out on their salvation and they’re condemned to the flames of hell forever. They also apply these statements of Jesus to the rest of humanity as well, meaning **we** lose out on salvation and go to hell if we don’t believe in Jesus either.

But isn’t that exactly what Jesus was saying in **Matthew 13:41-42**? “The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” and **verses 49-50**, “This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous, and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” and **Matthew 24:51**, “He (Jesus) will cut him (the wicked servant) in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

All that “weeping and gnashing of teeth” - the same language Jesus used for the Jews, so isn’t that saying **we** experience the same fate **they** do if we too “cause sin,” “do evil,” don’t repent, and don’t believe Jesus Christ? Do we not go to hell as well?

But if that’s true, then **why didn’t God condemn the apostle Paul to hell?**

Paul fits ALL the categories of those Jesus spoke so harshly to. He was a Jew and a Pharisee (Acts 23:6) who, like most Jews and Pharisees, resisted Christ. He also caused sin and did a great deal of evil, hunting down Christians “from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe (in Christ),” Acts 22:19, “arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison,” verse 4.

In Paul’s own estimation he was “the worst of sinners,” 1 Timothy 1:16, having been “a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man,” verse 13. But Jesus didn’t condemn Paul to hell and or to losing out on his salvation, did he? Instead, he met Paul and opened his mind to who he, Jesus, was, and from that point on Paul did exactly what he was told. So why couldn’t Jesus have done that for all the other Jewish leaders? And why condemn them so harshly? OK, so they knew better and, yes, they should’ve recognized Christ, because they knew the Old Testament prophecies. But **so did Paul**, and he made all the same mistakes they did, but Jesus didn’t condemn him.

Paul must have wondered about that himself, but in verses 15-16 he had the answer, and here it is: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience.”

Oh, so Jesus waited until “the worst of sinners” turned up - worse even than all those other awful Pharisees he’d condemned so harshly - to “display” something about himself. It was his UNLIMITED PATIENCE. That was to be the message of Paul’s life, and what a message it was “for those who would believe on him (Christ) and receive eternal life,” verse 16. To anyone in the future, therefore, who thinks they’re in the same boat as Paul - wondering, perhaps, how God could ever forgive them for their atrocious attitudes and behaviour - they know from the story of Paul that Christ’s patience covers even **the worst** of sinners, including blasphemers, persecutors and violent abusers.

They can also read another statement of Paul’s in verse 13, that “I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.” What an insight into God, who extended mercy to the worst of sinners because he accepted that Paul didn’t actually realize what he was doing. It was like Jesus on the cross saying, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

But Paul **didn’t** know what he was doing. He was in a terrible state. He couldn’t even accept the scriptures he knew and loved that clearly identified Christ. But there was a cloud across his brain because, like so many of his fellow Jews, the *scriptures* had become more important than WHO they were talking about (John 5:39-40). But rather than condemn Paul for his ignorance and unbelief, God had “shown mercy” to Paul, pouring out his grace “abundantly” on him, verse 14, “along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

And why did he show mercy to Paul? It was for all those in the future “[who would believe on him \(Jesus\) and receive eternal life.](#)” They’d ponder the story of Paul and realize that ignorance and unbelief are no barrier to salvation. You can be in a terrible mess like Paul, even to the point of rejecting Christ and hunting down Christians, but it’s not the end of the road. What we get instead from Paul’s life is this beautiful picture of Christ’s unlimited patience.

But that’s why God called us to be Christians, “[that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light,](#)” remembering that at one time we too “[were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy,](#)” **1 Peter 2:9-10**. We were in exactly the same boat Paul was in. We were just as much in the dark as he was, with clouds across our brains, stumbling around in **our** ignorance and unbelief as well.

But we were shown mercy, just like Paul. Why? For the same reason Paul was shown mercy: to “[declare the praises of HIM \(Jesus\).](#)”

We were shown mercy so we can be living examples of Christ’s unlimited patience in his dealings with us humans. And having experienced his patience ourselves, we can then preach the GOOD NEWS to others of “[GRACE IN ALL ITS TRUTH,](#)” **Colossians 1:6**. The truth of grace is that Christ’s patience - to ALL those who are wallowing in the darkness of their ignorance and unbelief - is unlimited. It never ends. It waits with interminable patience for the likes of Paul as he hunted down Christians. It puts up with the likes of us as we “[followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air.... gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts,](#)” and it watches as we too, just “[like the rest](#)” of humanity, sputter through life with no redeeming qualities whatsoever. “[We were by nature \(at heart and core\) objects of wrath,](#)” **Ephesians 2:2-3**.

“Objects of wrath,” means we deserve God’s anger. So did the Pharisees. They deserved every bit of what Christ threatened them with. So did Paul. So do we. We ALL fit the category of “[objects of his wrath - prepared for destruction,](#)” **Romans 9:22**. But we also know he “[bore \(put up with us\) with GREAT PATIENCE.](#)” And why was that? “[To make the riches of his glory known,](#)” **verse 23**. He put up with us **to reveal the kind of God he is**. And what we see is his glorious ability to be merciful toward us foolish, blind human beings who deserve to be cast out into outer darkness.

God **could** have chosen instead “[to show his wrath and make his power known,](#)” **verse 22**, by **carrying through** with his threats in all those scriptures on page 1. But we keep seeing this **other** side of him, tucked in among those same scriptures, that seems to contradict his threats, including a couple of verses that pop up in the very same chapter as one of Christ’s most angry outbursts.

The two verses are in **Luke 13:34-35** where Jesus cries out, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Look at the contrast of emotions here. First of all, Christ is fully aware of the murderous history of the Jews, because HE was the one who’d sent the prophets to them in the first place, that they then killed. But knowing that history, does it sound like Jesus hates them for it, and in his hate he condemns them to hell and outer darkness forever? No, because here we see he LOVES them, and how deeply he wishes he could be their Saviour, but they simply weren’t interested. And now look at the mess they were in, completely blind to who he was, and totally missing out on what he’d come to them for. It was tragic and it moved Jesus deeply.

The hell Jesus was **most** concerned about, therefore, was the living hell they were ALREADY in, and WOULD be in for a long time to come. His greatest desire was to get them out of hell not put them in it. And one day in the future he **would** save them from it too, **Romans 11:26-27**: “The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.” The day really **was** coming, therefore, when they’d bless those preaching Christ, because they’d realize Christ had totally forgiven them and buried all their sins forever. AND they’d realize **why** he’d done it too - because “**they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable,**” **verse 28-29**.

God had never forgotten his promises to the “patriarchs,” Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants, the Israelites and later the Jews. Despite everything, therefore, that the nation of Israel had done and the Jews in Jesus’ day had done, **God had never stopped loving them**. His gifts and all that he’d promised when he called them as his chosen people, remained intact as ever. They were “irrevocable,” or irreversible.

But HOW do Israel and the Jews come to realize all this? Through another group of people God called, another “**remnant chosen by grace**” (verse 5), this time from among the Gentiles who would “**stand by faith (in Christ),**” **verse 20**. Unlike the Jews, they would not have a problem with unbelief. But never would they replace the Jews. Instead, the Gentiles get to “**share in the nourishing sap from the olive root,**” **verse 17**. They’re not replacing, they’re sharing, meaning salvation is still open to the Jews as well.

So to all us Gentiles who think the Jews should be cast into outer darkness forever for their ignorance and belief, Paul has this to say in **verse 18**: “**consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.**” If it wasn’t for the root of GOD’s unending promises and unlimited patience to the Jews, NO ONE would receive salvation.

And one day we're all going to **see** the glory of Christ's unlimited patience toward the Jews, in **Hebrews 8:10-12**, when, Jesus says, "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts they will ALL KNOW ME, from the least of them to the greatest. **For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.**" There's a time coming when they too, like us Gentiles now, will know God's "kindness" (Romans 11:22). They'll realize at last what kind of God he's been to them all through the centuries of their ignorance and unbelief. They'll also realize it's only because of him GIVING them faith and love - as he did to Paul (1 Timothy 1:14) - that they're able to respond to him at all. And now it's **their** turn to understand "grace in all its truth."

So God hasn't given up on the Jews, has he? But why, then, does Christ express all that anger to the Jews of his day if he doesn't mean to carry it out? Because the Jews had to hear what they deserved first to understand God's MERCY, and they needed to realize how hurt Jesus was to understand his LOVE for them. His anger not only revealed the depths of their depravity, it also revealed the depths of his love for them.

And we see that in how Jesus dealt with Paul. He was angry with Paul, yelling at him on the road to Damascus, "Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?" He accused Paul of working directly against him, and he shone a light so bright that Paul was blinded by it. So Jesus confronted Paul with his ignorance and unbelief, but he didn't blast Paul into hell for eternity for what he'd done. Instead, he told Paul how stupid he'd been for "kicking against the goads," **Acts 26:14**.

Goads were heavy, eight foot long strips of wood with iron at the tip for cleaning clay off the plough, and if an ox kicked it in anger it could do a nasty injury to the ox. In other words, Paul was only hurting himself by resisting Christ. Jesus is basically saying, then: "You're an idiot Paul, because **you're the one missing out** by not believing me. It's **your** house that's desolate, **your** life that's a living hell, **your** mind that's eaten up with hostility." Jesus didn't hate Paul. Rather, he hated what Paul was doing to himself.

Jesus then says in **verse 16**, "And now what are you waiting for (Paul)? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name." So, after a somewhat painful but brief exposing of Paul's stupidity, Jesus isn't wasting any more time on that, he wants Paul up and out of there to have all his stupidity buried forever in baptism and to start telling people that what had just happened to him (Paul) can happen to them too - that in Jesus all their sins, no matter how monstrous or idiotic, are washed away.

And that would INCLUDE the Jews too, because, as Paul reminds us Gentiles in **Romans 11:25-26** - "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery...: Israel has experienced a hardening in part **UNTIL** the full number of the Gentiles has come in. **And so all Israel will be saved.**" God hasn't given up on the Jews. His salvation is still open to them, showing us all that even the worst of sinners can be forgiven. But that's "grace in all its truth," and there's no better proof of it than God's dealings with Israel.

It's interesting to see, then, what made Paul angry AFTER he understood this. "I am astonished," he says in **Galatians 1:6-7**, "that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all." He then makes an extremely harsh statement in **verse 8** (repeated in **verse 9**): "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, **let him be eternally condemned!**"

That's harsh language. It's like saying, "If you don't preach the right gospel, you can go to hell!" But Jesus used exactly the same language for the Jews in his day too - and he said it with the same strength of feeling. But now we see the reason for it. The gospel contains the wonderful message of all that God promised us in Jesus Christ, and the longing Christ has to gather us under his wings and rescue us from the living hell we're in right now, and to lift us out of our desolate, empty lives and protect us from the power of evil that controls all humanity.

To hide or "pervert" such a message (verse 7) is criminal, because it hides the love of Christ. No wonder Paul got angry. And no wonder Jesus got angry at the Jews too - not because he hated them, but because they weren't interested in his love for them. He couldn't give them all that he had to give, and that's what hurt him so deeply.

It's important that we preach the right gospel, therefore, so that Christ's love and unlimited patience shine through. So **what IS** the gospel message we preach? It's beautifully summarized in **verse 3**: "**Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.**"

The true gospel is totally about Christ's unlimited patience and grace with us sinners. And if it takes harsh words and threats of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" to get that into our heads, so be it, because Jesus used harsh words too, but in love to wake people up to what they were missing and to the hurt they were causing themselves.

The "weeping and gnashing of teeth" doesn't last forever, either. For the Jews it's only from the time when the Pharisees rejected Christ **up to** the time when the "**the full number of the Gentiles has come in,**" **Romans 11:25**. During that time, however, their house really is desolate, as Jesus said in Luke 13:35. For centuries since 70 A.D. they've suffered terribly. They've wept and gnashed teeth under constant persecution and endless threats of genocide by their enemies.

But the same goes for the rest of us too, **Romans 11:32**, "**For God has bound ALL men over to disobedience.**" We've ALL had to suffer the consequences of rejecting God. And many are YET to suffer too, as Jesus said in Matthew 13 and 24 (on page 1). But for what purpose? "**So that he may have MERCY on them all.**" Despite our rejection, his salvation is still open. Because that's the gospel: it's "**GRACE in all its (amazing) truth.**"