**Core Seminar - Missions: Week 3**

**Is Jesus the Only Way? The Necessity of Conscious Faith in Christ.**

**January 20, 2022**

**Main idea:** The necessity of conscience faith in Christ to avoid God’s punishment and wrath displays the infinite worth of God and fuels the urgency of missions.

**Class goals:**

* Clarify the doctrine of eternal conscious torment in hell for those who lack saving faith in Christ.
* Teach on the necessity of conscious faith in Christ without making *guilt* and *horror* at Hell the motivation of missions.
* Condemn insider-movements and other missions strategies that downplay Christian doctrinal distinctives.

# Introduction

In the first two weeks of this class, we’ve taught that the foundation and fuel of missions is the worth and glory of God. And as God acts to magnify his own glory, he particularly delights to glorify his name by showing mercy to sinners.

As we saw last week, this has been God’s plan all along! To bless all nations through Christ. So missions exists to advance the worship of God through the praise of His glory in the hearts of all people. And we can rest assured that God’s mission will not fail. He has promised it; he will do it!

But if that’s true, what is it that makes missions an urgent endeavor? In other words, what keeps us from sitting back, relaxing, and waiting for God to finish his mission? What is it that propels Christians to action?

In this class, we’re going to be looking at the heart of the urgency of missions. And that is, the necessity of conscious faith in Christ.

What makes the missionary task urgent is the reality of God’s impending judgment and the prospect of eternal suffering for any who have not trusted in Christ. As the student missions conference that just took place, CrossCon, summed it up well: “Hell is real. Time is Short. Jesus says, ‘Go.’”

## An unpopular teaching

Now, this idea that conscious faith is needed to avoid eternal punishment in Hell is a doctrine that is becoming increasingly passé. Few doctrines face such frequent and unabating attacks. Many today think of the Christian teaching of the exclusivity of faith in Christ as ignorant and intolerant. Few sensibilities are more basic today than that “everyone deserves an equal chance,” right? Then why should someone with no access to the Gospel be held to the same standard as someone who grows up going to church?

I don’t want to downplay the emotional weight of these questions. Many Christians have struggled with these questions. I’m sure you have either wrestled with them yourself or else encountered these questions from friends, co-workers, or family members. While this class may not answer every question you have satisfactorily, I hope it will help you better understand the Bible’s teaching, the relationship between faith in Christ and missions, and how what is at stake in these questions is nothing less than the glory of God.

For the purposes of this class, we will break this topic down into three questions that form the basis for your outline:

1. Does the Bible teach the doctrine of Hell?
2. Is Christ’s work necessary for salvation? Or are there other alternatives?
3. Can there be saving faith apart from Christ? In other words, can people be saved through Christ without realizing it is Christ who saves them?

As we discuss this topic this morning, I am hoping that two things will be clear. First, what is at stake in the way you answer these questions is the urgency of missions. If hell is not real, or if Christ’s work, or conscious faith in him are not necessary, the urgency of missions dissipates. These are three questions that make or break the urgency of missions, so how we answer them is of utmost importance.

Secondly, I hope it will be clear that the way we answer these three questions is not disconnected to the worth and glory of God. This topic isn’t disconnected from the past two weeks. Let me just give three quick reasons why:

1. First, the reality of Hell shows the infinite seriousness of the sin of failing to glorify God.
2. Second, the necessity of Christ’s atonement shows the glory of God’s grace.
3. Third, the demand for conscious faith in Christ shows the infinite worth of Christ.

I’ll unpack these three reasons further as we go.

Let’s start with that first question.

# I. Does the Bible teach the doctrine of Hell? *(The reality of Hell shows the infinite seriousness of the sin of failing to glorify God)*

Now this is a heavy topic. But we need to start, not with our questions, or emotional response to the question, but with the Bible’s teaching.

And the Bible’s teaching on this question is, yes. It has often been observed that Jesus spoke of hell more than anyone else. One of the clearest places of Jesus’ teaching on this is Matthew 25. There he says in verse 31 that there is a day coming when he will “come in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne” (25:31). He will separate the ‘sheep’ from the ‘goats’ and in verse 41, “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

Notice three things about this judgment. First, Jesus says that this punishment was originally prepared for the devil and his angels: for the fallen angels who rebelled against him. Second, Jesus says that this punishment is eternal. It is not a temporary punishment with an expiration date. It is a punishment that will last as long as heaven. Third, Jesus describes this punishment as a place of fire. This is consistent with other passages like Mark 9:48 where Jesus refers to hell as a place “‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched,” or Revelation 20 which refers to hell as ‘a lake of fire,’ or Daniel 12:2 which says that “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

This is what our Church Statement of Faith teaches.

XVIII. Of The World To Come

*We believe that the end of the world is approaching; that at the last day Christ will descend from heaven, and raise the dead from the grave to final retribution; that a solemn separation will then take place; that the wicked will be djudged to endless punishment, and the righteous to endless joy; and that this judgment will fix forever the final state of men in heaven or hell, on principles of righteousness.*

And while this is a difficult doctrine, friends, we need to start here, becausethe urgency of missions and the glory of God depend on it. *The reality of Hell shows the infinite seriousness of the sin of failing to glorify God.*

You see, the infinite horrors of hell are intended by God to be a vivid demonstration of the infinite value of his glory, that sinners have belittled in their rebellion.

Jonathan Edwards saw this clearly. He understood that degrees of blameworthiness come from how high the dignity is that you offend. As a just judge affirms the value of a murdered life, by a proportional sentence for the perpetrator, the reality of Hell shows the infinite value of the glory our sin has offended. He writes,

“Our obligation to love, honor and obey any being is in proportion to his loveliness, honorableness, and authority… But God is a being infinitely lovely, because he hath infinite excellency and beauty…

So sin against God, being a violation of infinite obligations, must be a crime infinitely heinous, and so deserving infinite punishment… The eternity of the punishment of ungodly men renders it infinite... and therefore renders no more than proportionable to the heinousness of what they are guilty of.”

(Jonathan Edwards, “The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinnners,” in *Works* vol. 1, 669. Quoted in Piper, LTNBG, 122.)

→ Share illustration about Eric Bohn. January 6, 2016. I was once on a Southwest flight down to Atlanta and sat next to a George Washington University college student. As we struck up a conversation, it quickly turned to spiritual matters. He had been raised nominally ‘Episcopalian’ but wasn’t practicing. I asked him if I could share the gospel with him and began to draw the ‘bridge diagram’ on a napkin and walk through Romans 6:23. But when I got to the doctrine of sin, we got stuck. He refused to accept the idea that his sins were deserving of punishment–much less the punishment of hell. I shared the Jonathan Edwards analogy with him. I reasoned with him from other passages in Scripture. But he remained unconvinced. As I later wrote down, ‘He isn’t willing to see himself as a sinner who deserves God’s punishment.’ So I picked up the napkin that I had written out Romans 6:23 on, folded it up, and stuffed it in my pocket, and I told him, “I want to share the good news of the gospel with you. But until you understand that your sins deserve God’s judgment, you’ll never be able to appreciate what God has done for you in Christ.” We spent the remainder of the flight in awkward silence as I prayed for him. And I still pray for him.

If you remove the reality of Hell, or even attempt to minimize its horror, you not only diminish the urgency of missions, but you diminish the worth and glory of God.

But not only that. Downplaying or ignoring the doctrine of hell undermines the urgency of missions. After all, why spend so much time and money and potential give your life if what the Bible teaches about hell isn’t true?

→ **Discussion Question:** How would downplaying or denying the doctrine of Hell change the mission of the church?

*The biblical teaching of eternal, conscious, torment in hell, for those who persist in unrepentant rebellion against God underscores both the glory of God and the urgency of missions.*

Now, if Hell is real, the question is, how are people saved? If you look at the second point on your handout, you’ll see the question:

# 

# II. Is the work of Christ necessary for salvation? Or can people be saved some other way that through the work of Christ? Are other religions sufficient for bringing people to God? Why is Christ the only way?

The necessity of Christ’s atonement shows the glory of God’s grace.

If hell is not as real as the Bible teaches, then God is not as glorious as the Bible teaches, then sin is not as serious as the Bible teaches, then Christ’s death is not as necessary as the Bible teaches, then missions is not as urgent as the Bible teaches.

All these doctrines hang together. Downplaying the doctrine of hell, by necessity, downplays the doctrine of sin, and by implication, the necessity of Christ’s atonement.

But if Hell really isas real as the Bible teaches and if God really isas glorious as the Bible teaches, and if sin really is as serious as the Bible teaches, then Christ’s death really is as necessary as the Bible teaches!

We see this so clearly in Romans where Christ is set forth as the universal answer to sin. Christ’s death is not one among many ways God deals with sin: it is the only way we could be made righteous before God. Paul tells us that just as sin and death came into the world through one man Adam, life comes into the world through one man: Christ. So we read in Romans chapter 5:

*For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:17)*

*For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. (1 Corinthians 15:21)*

Christ is uniquely qualified to save because he, being God, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross, shedding his blood as a ransom for the sins of those who would trust in Him and repent of their sins. For this reason, he alone is worthy -- not Buddha or Mohammed or any other religious leader. This is the wonderful picture we see in Revelation chapter 5:

*“Worthy are you to take the scroll*

*and to open its seals,*

*for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God*

*from every tribe and language and people and nation,*

*and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,*

*and they shall reign on the earth.”* (Rev. 5:9-10).

Only Christ is worthy to take the scroll and open the seals.

What does this mean for missions? Well, it means that since Christ is the only way for salvation, He must be announced to all the nations. Man will not be saved outside of Christ. As we read in Luke(24:46-47):

*“repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”*

→ **Discussion Question:** How does the necessity and sufficiency of the atonement inform our evangelism?

Someone might say, fine, salvation can only be obtained through the redemptive work of Christ. But that doesn’t mean that someone actually has to hear the Gospel to be saved? This leads to our last question:

# 

# III. Can people be saved through Christ without realizing it is Christ who saves them? Simply put, do people need to hear of Christ and have a conscious faith in him in order be saved?

You’ve all probably heard the hypothetical question about the innocent person on an island who never had the chance to hear the gospel. Can they be saved?

The unequivocal teaching of Scripture is… yes. Yes, an innocent person, who had never heard the gospel, would undoubtedly spend eternity with God in heaven. There’s only one problem. There is no innocent person on an island who has never heard the gospel because there are no innocent people. As Romans 3 teaches,

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (Romans 3:10-12).

We need to understand the Bible’s teaching on this point. No one will ever be condemned to hell by God for rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ. But whether we’ve heard the gospel or not, all people have sinned against God, and thereby deserved the punishment of hell for rebelling against God, such that, as the Synod of Dort wrote in 1619,

“As all men have sinned in Adam, and have become exposed to the curse and eternal death, God would have done no injustice to any one, if he had determined to leave the whole human race under sin and the curse, and to condemn them on account of sin, according to the words of the apostle, “that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God” (Rom. 3:19). And verse 23: “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” And Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death.”[[1]](#footnote-0)

This is foundational and has to be the starting point of any discussion of God’s justice. He is the creator, we are his creatures, he owes us nothing. As Paul reminds us in Romans 9, “ (Romans 9:20). who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”

As we saw in point 1, God’s judgment on sinners shows off his glory and worth, and in point 2, that only those for whom Christ is a substitute will be saved, so now point three, we see that Christ is only a substitute for those who have conscious faith in him.

We use this language of “conscious faith” in this class because the idea has emerged in recent times that people can be actually saved without any specific knowledge of Christ. A surprising number of theologians have fallen into this way of thinking. The German Catholic theologian Karl Rahner popularized the idea of the “anonymous Christian,” which Vatican II appropriated as the doctrine of the Catholic Church in the 1960’s, teaching that Jews, Muslims, and even Atheists could be saved while meanwhile rejecting Christ as Lord and savior. (Rahner: Non-Christians could have “in [their] basic orientation and fundamental decision, accepted the salvific grace of God, through Christ, although [they] may never have heard of the Christian revelation.”)

But again, we need to return to what the Bible teaches, and Scripture is clear that no one can be saved without a conscious knowledge of Christ.

Now people have always been saved by faith in God’s promises (for more on that, read Romans 4), but since the incarnation, all saving faith must be fixed on Christ. As Peter declared in Acts 4:12, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Paul explains this further in Acts 17 by referring to the Old Covenant era as the “times of ignorance” for the gentiles (Acts 17:30) when God’s saving focus was on the nation of Israel in preparing the way for the Messiah. But now that Christ has come, the veil of ignorance has been lifted! Now God will no longer allow “the nations to walk in their own ways” (Acts 14:16), but as Paul explains, God “now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed” (Acts 17:30-31).

This is why Paul can write in Ephesians, “When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph. 3:4-5; Cf. Romans 16:25-27).

Now that Christ has been revealed, all saving faith must consciously center on him. This is the logic of Romans 10. If you have your Bibles, turn there with me to Romans 10:9-15:

## Romans 10:9-15

*[9] because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. [10] For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. [11] For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” [12] For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. [13] For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”[14] How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? [15] And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”*

*(Romans 10:9-15 ESV)*

Do you follow the logic of this passage? From verses 13 to 15 every question is answered by the following verse that then asks the next logical question.

So in verse 13, who does Paul say will be saved? “Those who call on him.” (v. 13)

But who will call on Him? “Those who have believed.” (v. 14a).

But how will they believe? They have to hear! (v. 14b

How will they hear? Someone has to preach the gospel to them (v. 14c)

How will someone preach the gospel to them? They must be sent (v. 15).

So if you reverse the order, the process of salvation looks like: Sending (v. 15), Preaching (v. 14c), Hearing (v. 14b), Believing (v. 14a), Calling (v. 13). This is the process revealed by God in his word. There is no other.

**→ So let me ask you a question. We’ve talked about how all of this connects back to the glory of God. How does the necessity of conscious faith in Christ show off the infinite worth of Christ?**

## Insider Movements

One concerning trend in missions today is the spread of so-called ‘Insider Movements.’ Particularly in the Muslim world, some missiologists today are advocating that while personal faith is essential, that personal faith may not be public. As David Garrison writes in *Wind in the House of Islam*, Muslim-background believers should “remain within the Muslim community as witnesses, continuing to see themselves culturally, socially and officially as Muslims,” rather than as Christians.[[2]](#footnote-1) This is often argued as a mission’s strategy. After all, how will Muslim-background believers evangelize their families and neighbors if they are forced to flee because of their faith? Or worse, if they are killed?

The result is the proliferation of “secret believers” who supposedly have faith in Jesus in their hearts while remaining culturally, religiously, and socially indistinguishable from the rest of their community. As one such “secret believer” in Eastern South Asia named explains, “I believe 100 percent that Jesus is God, but I cannot tell this to the Muslims. If I say this, then the Muslims will open torture upon us. I am following Jesus example.”[[3]](#footnote-2) Being pressed about what he meant by “Jesus’ example,” he quoted Mark 1:23-25, where Jesus silences the demons: “This is a great teaching for us,” he explained. Jesus is saying, “It is not the time to teach that I am the Son of God.”[[4]](#footnote-3)

I share this example to highlight how widespread such ideas are in missions today. But if Romans 10:9-15 is true–and it is–how will other Muslims believe if Christ is not clearly proclaimed? And to put it even more sharply, how can one be saved in their heart if they are unwilling to profess Christ with their lips? As Romans 10:10: “​​For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

# Conclusion

To bring all of this together, I hope you see how all of this is related to God’s glory and missions. First we saw how the Bible’s teaching on hell shows the infinite seriousness of the sin of failing to glorify God. Second, we discussed how the necessity of Christ’s atonement shows the glory of God’s grace. And third, we saw how the demand for conscious faith in Christ shows the infinite worth of Christ.

I want to close by emphasizing how any shift from these fundamental doctrines would cut a nerve for missionary motivation. Conversely, understanding the seriousness of Hell, the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, and the necessity of faith in Christ propel us to proclaim Christ to those who have not heard of Him.

Even as we acknowledge that the desire to see God glorified in our faithfulness is the great foundation of missionary endeavor, we must see that a robust understanding of the exclusivity of the Gospel is a worthy motivation, too. Far from being a discouraging doctrine the uniqueness and the exclusivity of Christ causes our hearts to increasingly burn with the desire to be the instrument he uses to bring the lifesaving Gospel to men and women appointed for eternal life all around the World.

Let’s pray.

1. Thomas Scott, trans., *The Articles of the Synod of Dort* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1841), 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. David Garrison, *Wind in the House of Islam* (WIGTake, 2014)*,* 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Garrison, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Garrison*,* 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)