

**Sermon on Hell is Not Eternal - Unless We Want It to Be**  
**By Rev. J. Hugh Odhner**

Lessons: Matthew 25:31-46  
Luke 16:19-31  
Divine Providence 285, 286

*“The Lord withdraws no one from his hell unless he sees that he is in hell and wishes to be led out....” (Divine Providence 251)*

The Word of the Lord, in all three Testaments, contains many apparent contradictions and paradoxes. For example Matthew 11 says:

*"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."*

While Matthew 7:12-14 says:

*"Enter by the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and easy is the way that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For narrow is the gate and hard is the way that leads to life, and few are those who find it."*

The first passage implies that following the Lord and the way to heaven is easy and the burden is light, while the second passage implies that the way to heaven is hard and very few find it.

Both of these passages are quoted in Heaven and Hell 533 and 534 and what is said there indicates how both passages can be true. From Heaven and Hell 533 we read:

*"That it is not so difficult to live the life of heaven as some believe, is ... clear from this, that when anything presents itself to a man that he knows to be dishonest and unjust, but to which his mind is led, it is simply necessary for him to think that it ought not to be done because it is opposed to Divine precepts. If a man accustoms himself so to think, and from so doing establishes a habit of so thinking, he is gradually conjoined to heaven.... Into this state a person is able to enter because of his freedom, for isn't any*

*one able from his freedom to so think? And when he has made a beginning, the Lord performs all the good works with him, and causes him not only to see the evils to be evils, but also to refrain from willing them, and finally to turn away from them. This is meant by the Lord's words,*

*My yoke is easy and My burden is light. Matt. xi. 30.*

*But it ought to be known that the difficulty of so thinking and of resisting evils increases so far as a person from his will does evils, for in the same measure he becomes accustomed to them until he no longer sees them, and at length loves them and, from the delight of his love, excuses them, and confirms them by all kinds of fallacies, and declares them to be allowable and good. This is what happens with those who in early youth plunge into evils without restraint, and then at the same time reject Divine things from the heart." (Heaven and Hell 533)*

So the yoke becomes easy and the burden light to the degree that we resist doing what is evil when the thought of doing so occurs to us, but it becomes increasingly hard the more we give in to our devilish desires and become accustomed to excusing them.

Now this idea ties in with the subject of our sermon, Hell is Not Eternal - Unless We Want It to Be, and with our text from Divine Providence 251, "*The Lord withdraws no one from his hell unless he sees that he is in hell and wishes to be led out....*"

The Lord loves everyone because he is pure Divine Love. And from that Divine Love he wishes to draw everyone into heaven provided that they wish to be with Him in heaven. To everyone the Lord gives freedom, and he never takes that away from anyone. So in the laws of Divine Providence it is said:

*Man possesses reason and freedom, or rationality and liberty; and these two faculties are in man from the Lord (DP 73).*

***It is by means of these two faculties that man is reformed and regenerated by the Lord; and without them he cannot be reformed and regenerated (DP 82).***

*The Lord preserves these two faculties in man inviolate and as sacred in the whole course of His Divine providence (DP 96).*

*1. Without these two faculties man would not possess will and understanding, and would not be man (DP 96.2).*

*2. Without these two faculties man could not be conjoined with the Lord, and thus could not be reformed and regenerated (DP 96.5).*

*3. **Without these two faculties man could not have immortality and eternal life (DP 96.7).***

Notice that it is said that the Lord gives freedom and reason to everyone, and that from these we have immortality and eternal life. This applies to all of us both good and bad, to those in heaven and to those in hell. The Divine Providence is equally with the evil and with the good. (DP 287)

Let us look at some more laws of the Divine Providence:

*Every person may be reformed, and there is no such thing as predestination. (DP 322)*

*The end of creation is a heaven made from the human race (DP 323).*

*1. Everyone was created to live forever (DP 324.1).*

*2. Everyone was created to live to eternity in a state of blessedness (DP 324.6).*

*3. Thus everyone was created to come into heaven (DP 324.7).*

*Therefore **it is of the Divine providence that everyone can be saved, and that those are saved who acknowledge God and live well (DP 325).***

*The person himself is to blame if he is not saved (DP 327).*

Some more laws of Divine Providence:

*The operation of the Divine providence for the salvation of man begins at his birth and continues until the end of his life **and afterwards to eternity (DP 332).***

***The operation of the Divine providence goes on unceasingly, through means, out of pure mercy (DP 335).***

*Instantaneous salvation from mercy apart from means is impossible (DP 338).*

From these laws of Divine Providence, it is clear that the Lord wishes to draw everyone into heaven, as said earlier. The question really is whether

the person or spirit wishes to be with the Lord in heaven. Many of those who are concerned about whether the hells are eternal may have a question as to whether the Lord desires to punish people eternally. He doesn't! They may wonder whether he wishes to save everyone. He does! And he loves us so much that he will not force us to love him in return if we do not want to. He regards our freedom as something sacred (DP 96).

So going back to our text: *The Lord withdraws no one from his hell unless he sees that he is in hell and wishes to be led out....*” The Lord is endeavoring constantly to withdraw everyone from his or her own hell. But if we really desire to be there, if we love to be there, he will not relocate us against our will.

Now that passage and all the laws of Providence we may want to apply especially to the spirits who choose to live in hell. But perhaps it makes more sense to apply the passages much closer to home. Doesn't it make more sense to see the passages in relation to our own lives. Most of us have experienced times when it seems like we are living in hell. Those who have had experience with addictions may know what this is like. And most of us, perhaps I should say all of us, have times when we are thinking and acting like devils -- thinking unkind thoughts about others, wishing others would get what they so rightly deserve -- according to our judgment, gossiping, backbiting, criticizing. Most of us have been there, sometimes on a daily basis, sometimes several times a day. That is our own personal hell it creates a hellish attitude within us, and may create a hellish environment around us. And that is what the Lord wishes to withdraw us from. But for him to do so it is necessary for us to see and recognize the state we are in and desire to be led out. If we truly have that desire, the Lord will provide us the means to lead us out.

**Amen.**

## **LESSONS**

### **Matthew 25:31-46**

<sup>31</sup> "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.

<sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides *his* sheep from the goats.

<sup>33</sup> And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

<sup>34</sup> Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of

My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

<sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in;

<sup>36</sup> I *was* naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'

<sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed *You*, or thirsty and give *You* drink?

<sup>38</sup> When did we see You a stranger and take *You* in, or naked and clothe *You*?

<sup>39</sup> Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'

<sup>40</sup> And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did *it* to one of the least of these My brethren, you did *it* to Me.'

<sup>41</sup> Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels:

<sup>42</sup> for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink;

<sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.'

<sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?'

<sup>45</sup> Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do *it* to one of the least of these, you did not do *it* to Me.'

<sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

### **Luke 16:19-31**

<sup>19</sup> "There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day.

<sup>20</sup> But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate,

<sup>21</sup> desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table.

Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

<sup>22</sup> So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried.

<sup>23</sup> And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

<sup>24</sup> Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send

Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'

<sup>25</sup> But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented.

<sup>26</sup> And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'

<sup>27</sup> Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house,

<sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'

<sup>29</sup> Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'

<sup>30</sup> And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

<sup>31</sup> But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded even if one rises from the dead.' "

### **Divine Providence 251, 285, 286**

**251.** *The Lord withdraws no one from his hell unless he sees that he is in hell and wishes to be led out ....*”

**285.** *The Divine Providence is equally with the wicked and with the good.* In every man, whether good or evil, there are two faculties, one of which constitutes the understanding, and the other the will. The faculty which constitutes the understanding is the ability to understand and to think, and is therefore called rationality. The faculty which constitutes the will is the ability to do these things freely, namely, to think and consequently to speak and to act, provided only it is not contrary to reason or rationality; for to act freely is to act as often as one wills and according as one wills.

[2] ... man is man by virtue of these two faculties, he is able to think and speak, to perceive what is good and understand truths, not only those that are civil and moral but also those that are spiritual, and also to be reformed and regenerated; in a word, he can be conjoined to the Lord and thereby live forever; and ... not only those who are good but also the wicked possess these two faculties.

**286.** Now as it is a law of the Divine Providence that man should act from freedom according to reason, that is, from the two faculties of liberty and rationality; and as it is also a law of the Divine Providence that what a person does should appear to him as from himself and consequently as his own; and further as it is a law that evils must be permitted in order that a person may be led out of them; it follows that a person can abuse these faculties and from freedom according to reason confirm whatever he pleases. For he can make whatever he will to be reasonable whether it is reasonable in itself or not.

**AMEN**