

What Christmas Has To Do With Hell
Pastor Steven J. Cole, Flagstaff Christian Fellowship, December, 1997

A florist got the messages mixed up on the orders he sent out. A woman received flowers sent by her husband who was at a business meeting in Florida. She was puzzled to read on the card, "My deepest sympathy."

But she was not nearly as surprised as the woman whose husband had just passed away. Her card read, "Hotter here than I expected. Wish you were here, too!"

We probably joke about hell because it is so uncomfortable to face squarely. I confess that it is one of the most difficult teachings in all the Bible. I would much rather set it aside or disbelieve it, but I cannot. Since Jesus taught it so plainly, I can't claim to follow him and at the same time reject his teaching about hell. Frankly, it is no joking matter!

Jesus taught a lot about hell. Here I can only touch on some of what he taught. He said that it is better to pluck out your eye or cut off your hand or foot, if they cause you to stumble, than to be cast into hell, which he described as a place "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:43-48). It is a place of "outer darkness" where there shall be "weeping and gnashing of teeth." He called it a place of "eternal fire" and "eternal punishment" (Matt. 25:41, 46). In his graphic parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man in hell is described as being "in torment." He wishes that someone might "dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame" (Luke 16:23, 24).

These descriptions are enough to show that Jesus did not picture hell as a wild party, a fun place to cavort with other sinners, as many jokes commonly portray it. He warned people of its agony in the most frightening terms. If Jesus knew what he was talking about, you want to avoid hell at all possible costs!

Many people think, "Yes, there is a hell and it is a terrible place. But I don't need to worry about going there, because I'm a basically good person. The only ones who will go to hell are the mass murderers, child molesters, and that sort."

Think again! Jesus indicated that if a man mentally lusts after a woman, he is in danger of his whole body being thrown into hell (Matt. 5:28-30)! If you are angry with someone, you are guilty of murder in God's sight and are "guilty enough to go into the fiery hell" (Matt. 5:22). In other words, according to Jesus, we're all in big, big trouble! We all are guilty enough many times over to be cast into hell.

By now maybe you're wondering, "What does any of this have to do with Christmas?" *Everything!* Let me explain.

When Jesus was born, the angel announced to the shepherds, "I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10, 11). Have you ever thought about what it means that Jesus is called the *Savior*? What is he saving people from? Answer: God's judgment, which is hell.

Savior is a radical word. People who just need a little moral uplift don't need a Savior. People who are pretty good folks, but just need a little guidance, don't need a Savior. The only people who need a Savior are those in desperate straits. If you are lost at sea in a small boat in a violent storm, you don't need a little guidance. You need the Coast Guard to *save* you! You will perish if someone does not intervene. And if they do save you, you are overwhelmed with great joy!

In light of that, think about how Jesus described his mission: "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). If you're lost in sin, under God's just condemnation because you have broken his holy laws, then the message of Christmas is "good news of a great joy": The Savior has come! If you receive him, you are saved from God's judgment. That's the only way to have a truly merry Christmas.