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A Punishment Worse Than Sodom and Gomorrah

Scripture: Matthew 11

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Nevertheless I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.(11:24)

Few things Jesus might have said could have stunned Jews more than to be unfavorably compared to Gentiles. **Nevertheless, I say to you**, Jesus continued, **it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment, than for you.** At the great white throne judgment, the dead of all the ages will be brought before the throne of God to be judged and sentenced to eternal punishment. And at that judgment the unbelieving Gentiles of Tyre and Sidon will fare better than the unbelieving Jews of Chorazin and Bethsaida.

Jesus here makes two truths clear: there will be degrees of punishment in hell, and among those given the severest punishment will be those who have received the divine revelation and been the most religious and outwardly upright. Those who thought they were eternally safe-because they were Abraham's physical descendants and because they kept the religious traditions of their forefathers-looked with contempt on all Gentiles. Yet in hell many Gentiles will look down on those Jews.

But another city of Galilee was guiltier still. **And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades.** Jesus made His headquarters in this beautiful, prosperous fishing village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He performed more miracles and preached more sermons in and around **Capernaum** than at any other place during His entire ministry. It was there that He raised Jairus's daughter from the dead and healed the nobleman's son. It was here that He healed the demoniac, Peter's mother-in-law, the woman with the hemorrhage, the two blind men, the centurion's servant, the dumb demoniac, and the paralytic who was lowered through the roof by his friends.

Yet those marvels had little impact on most citizens of **Capernaum**; and because of their indifference they would not **be exalted to heaven** as they thought they deserved but would rather **descend to Hades.**

Although **Hades** is sometimes used in Scripture to represent the place of all the departed dead, it is often used, as here, to represent hell, the place of eternal punishment for the unsaved.

Jesus said that the **miracles** He performed in Capernaum were so amazing that, had they **occurred in Sodom, ... it would have remained to this day**. Its people would have repented of their sin, turned to God, and been spared destruction.

Even in the secular world, **Sodom** is a synonym for moral depravity and has the infamous distinction of lending its name (in sodomy) to the most extreme forms of homosexuality and sexual bestiality. When a group of Sodom's worst perverts tried to rape the angels at Lot's house, they were struck blind. But their homosexual enslavement was so intense that even after being blinded "they weaned themselves trying to find the doorway" in order to satisfy their perverted lust (Gen. 19:11).

As far as is known, the people of **Capernaum** had no homosexual problem or any other apparent moral deficiency. Most of them were upright, law-abiding, and decent. Yet because they ignored and rejected the Son of God, their fate on the day of judgment will be worse than that of **Sodom**.

Capernaum exceeded Chorazin and Bethsaida in privilege, and Sodom exceeded Tyre and Sidon in wickedness. In these striking and sobering contrasts, Jesus makes plain that people who are the most blessed by God will receive the worst punishment if they reject Him. Judgment against the moral abominations of Sodom will be exceeded by judgment against the spiritual indifference of Capernaum. For the respectable and upright unbelievers of Capernaum, **Hades** will be hotter than for the crude and immoral unbelievers of Sodom. The self-righteous orthodox person is even more repulsive in God's sight than the idolatrous and immoral pagan.

The people of **Capernaum** never persecuted Jesus, and few of them even criticized Him. They never mocked Him, ridiculed Him, ran Him out of town, or threatened His life. Yet their sin was worse than if they had done those things. Theirs was not the sin of violence or of immorality but of indifference. As G. A. Studdert-Kennedy has written in his poem "Indifference," "They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain."

Jesus' teaching perhaps mildly interested them, and His miracles entertained them, but nothing more. His grace never rent their hearts, His truth never changed their minds, His warning about sin never provoked repentance, and His offer of salvation never induced faith. And because of their indifferent unbelief, Jesus said to them, **I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.**

The eighteenth-century commentator Johann Bengel wrote, "Every hearer of the New Testament truth is either much happier or much more wretched than the men who lived before Christ's coming." Such a hearer is also either more secure or more condemned.

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