

## **Punishment with Purpose**

By

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The Bible, as well as reason and the Law of Compensation, teach that there must be a reckoning, a time of justice in which sin is punished and righteousness rewarded. This teaching, however, must be in harmony with all of the divine scheme of the creator and, therefore, must be understood in the light of His eternal purpose.

It must take into consideration all that is revealed about God, man's fall from his original state and the means of restoring him; this the religious world has failed to do. The object of punishment for sin is treated as if it were something totally apart from the rest of revelation, taking no account of the original purpose of God in creating, ignoring the curse that fell upon man at the first sin, and failing to connect the penalty of sin with the price Christ paid to redeem man from that penalty. At the outset man was perfect. There was no death in him. The statement, "The day that thou shalt eat thereof, thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17), indicates that had man never sinned he never would have died. It was only after Adam rebelled, rejecting his creator as the one to direct his life, that it was said to him, "Dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return" (Genesis 3:19). If this was to mean something other than human death, it is strange that God chose to express it the way He did. Nothing is recorded to qualify such death as being a spiritual death, nor is there anything to suggest that Adam was to live in a state of torture.

The purpose of driving Adam from the garden is explicitly stated by God to keep Adam from eating of the tree of life and thus living forever (Genesis 3:22-24). This clearly shows that God did not propose a race of rebellious creatures continuing to mar His creation. It is amazing how theologians (?) try to explain God's punishment so that death in one instance is "spiritual separation from God" and in another instance is physical death! If this death, as punishment, was spiritual, then what could be the point of driving Adam from the physical means of life? The fact is death, as punishment for sin, is never qualified in scripture as "spiritual death." The common practice of applying this term "spiritual" to death is a case of adding to the scriptures to get a meaning different from the one intended.

The punishment of the wicked is not merely the separation of the creature from God since there is no place in God's universe where God is not. It is rather the death of the creature; hence, scripture consistently refers to that punishment as death or destruction. In contrast, traditional theology speaks of an "eternal soul" and an "immortal soul" forever living in a state of bliss or misery. This is to say that the righteous have life, but that the wicked also will have life even if such life is in a state of torment.

Such an idea negates the meaning of such scripture as Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." If the non-believer is to live forever, then this scripture must mean that the wages of sin is eternal life, but

the gift of God is eternal life, also! This belief that the wicked will live forever stems from the human idea that once man has come into being, he must continue to live forever, because he has an “immortal soul.” This idea persists in spite of the fact that nowhere in scripture is there the statement to support it. Scripture states the exact opposite — that Jesus ONLY has immortality (1 Timothy 6:16). The punishment for sin, therefore, is death, not “spiritual” death, whatever that may be supposed to mean, but death of the person, destruction that results in the cessation of life.

While it is certainly impossible for finite man to know all the motives of the Infinite creator, scripture states that God has revealed His eternal purpose through the Gospel (2 Timothy 1:8-10; Ephesians 1:7-12). This Gospel includes the fact of the sinner’s fate as well as the believer’s hope, so it also includes a revelation of the purpose of the punishment for sin.

Main-stream Christendom, both protestant and catholic, has presented the punishment of the wicked as vindictive — a spurned God seeking revenge. The sinner has committed a heinous crime in turning his back on God, and God retaliates with horrible punishment by keeping the sinner forever alive and in the most gruesome state of torture imaginable. One is hard-put to explain any purpose that the creator might have in keeping the creature” alive under such conditions, unless he imagines God to be vindictive or even sadistic. The purpose often given is simply that the threat of such a state is necessary to drive the sinner to God. But if one seeks refuge with God only because he desires to escape suffering, he still will be defeating the creator’s purpose. One is transformed into God’s-image through a desire to be like Him and thus turning to Him in love. It is one thing to be born again out of a sincere love of the creator and a desire to be like Him, and quite another thing to choose God merely because one seeks to escape a place of suffering.

Without a doubt one of the reasons why preachers continually try to coax church members into living for Christ, seeking His will, reading His word and putting first His kingdom and righteousness, all in vain, is that so many of these have only sought escape from punishment, and have no real desire for the image of God. Their motive for being in church is fear: fear of punishment. Such would do well to read the words of John: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, because fear has punishment; and he that fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

As viewed from scripture, the purpose of punishment is in harmony with the overall purpose of God from beginning of time to eternity. This punishment, as we have already shown, is destruction — not life, but the cessation of life — in a word: death. The purpose of such punishment is three-fold:

- (1) It is fulfillment of God’s order. The purpose of life which God has given to the creature has been voided by sin. God created man to be in His image. Having rejected the image of God, man has rejected the purpose of his existence. God does not operate against His own nature; hence, He does not make eternal that which is opposed to His purpose; therefore, He does not continue to give life to the sinner. It is not that God

threatens us with vindictive punishment if we displease Him. Rather He gives us the choice: Life on His terms, or death. Life is for the creature who fulfills the Creator's purpose. One who does not desire such fulfillment forfeits any right to be given life; hence, "The soul that sins shall die."

(2) The punishment of the sinner is for the purpose of satisfying the justice of an absolutely righteous God. That this punishment is death is adequately demonstrated by the death of Jesus, who acted in man's place in undergoing the punishment of death on the cross. The writer of the Hebrew letter plainly states that Jesus came into the world as a flesh and blood man, "that by the grace of God he should taste of death for every man." (Hebrews 2:14, 9).

Jesus did not endure perpetual punishing, but He did sustain the punishment of death, thus satisfying the justice of God with reference to the penalty of sin.

While the final destruction of sinners, through fire in the end of the world, will undoubtedly entail great suffering — perhaps much more for some than for others — the judgment is to be left in the hands of God who alone is able to mete punishment fit for the crime. It ill-behooves any human being to set the degree of temperature of the flame and the duration of the agony which God alone has the right and power to do. It is sufficient to say what is revealed, that the final end of the unbeliever will be death.

(3) The final destruction of man in the Day of Judgment is for the purpose of cleansing God's creation of all that is evil. John the Baptist portrayed Jesus as the landowner who gathers up the wheat and burns the chaff (Matthew 3:11-12). The purpose of the burning is to be rid of the chaff. Jesus pictures the rebels as being slain, since no kingdom can have harmony as long as it gives place to rebels (Luke 19:27). Peter explains that, at the last day, God will cause the heavens and the earth to be burned up and in this burning will be included the destruction of the wicked (2 Peter 3:7-13). The writer of Hebrews speaks of the heavens and the earth perishing (Hebrews 1:11). He uses the same Greek word for perish as is used in John 3:16 where we read that. "That whosoever believes on Him should not perish, but have eternal life." Certainly he does not mean that the heavens and the earth are to be kept in a state of torture.

In the words of the Commission on Evangelism appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and York in 1943 — "Ultimately all that is found valueless in God's sight must be and will be abolished, that that which He can use may be set free, and 'God may be all in all.' Revelation and reason alike point to this inevitable consummation. The idea of the inherent indestructibility of the human soul (or consciousness) owes its origin to the Greek, not to Bible sources. The central theme of the New Testament is eternal life, not for anybody and everybody, but for believers in Christ as risen from the dead. The choice is set before man here and now. Though the announcement of impending Judgment may not at first sight appear to be 'Good News,' yet it is integral to the Gospel. It is the assertion of the final triumph of good and of the abolition of evil."

Jesus repeatedly spoke of the unrighteous being cast into Gehenna. As all Bible students know, Gehenna was the ill-famed valley of Hinnom used by the residents of Jerusalem as a huge incinerator, a place to dispose of everything which they wanted to get rid of. Such is the destiny of all who reject the life God offers through Christ.

Many express the fear that if the punishment of the wicked is to be death, instead of the traditional idea of enduring suffering, the sinner will have no fear of impending Judgment. In fact, some have gone so far as to say that if they were not afraid of a perpetual and everlasting torture, they would give up the effort to maintain Christian virtues and would enjoy the sins of the world. Only a moment of reflection is enough to see that such people have no hope, for they evidently still love sin and have never sincerely repented. "Perfect love casts out fear." The redeemed of God will dwell with Him in the new earth because this is the life they sincerely desire, because they have loved righteousness, and have been cleansed from sin — not because they merely wanted to escape the fire.

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