

# JUSTICE AND PUNISHMENT

By

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In the humanistic system of justice, torture is generally accepted by the state as both a means of obtaining a confession as well as a means of punishment. More people have been killed by their own governments in the twentieth century than in all the wars. For a breach of state law, people are thrown into prison for decades, and often — for long periods of time — are kept in solitary confinement, which is a form of torture.

It may be a surprise to many to learn that Biblical law had no provision for incarceration, and torture was never a part of God's system of justice and punishment. Those guilty of theft or burglary were required to make restitution, with interest up to 400 percent. First degree murder, rape, homosexual acts and certain other crimes required the death penalty, but even for the most high-handed sins against God, no one was subjected to torture any longer than it took for his execution.

God's laws are rejected in modern courts. Seldom is even the worst criminal put to death, and now we are taxed to the limit to build more prisons to house lawbreakers. Instead of restitution being demanded of the guilty, the entire public becomes victims, having to support the prisoner at a cost of up to thirty thousand dollars annually. While prisons have been upgraded with sanitary facilities and television, anyone who has been confined with drug addicts, murderers and practicing homosexuals will tell you that imprisonment is torture.

From early on man's concept of justice by torture and imprisonment was incorporated into his interpretation of God's final judgment, to include sentencing to an endless life of perpetual torture or misery. Willfully overlooking the plain statements throughout scripture, that the final destiny of the unredeemed is death, proponents of the PTL (Perpetual Torture of the Lost) theory like to call attention to Matthew 25:46, regarding the goat and sheep judgment: "And these shall go away into eternal punishment; but the righteous into eternal life." The simplistic argument is that the punishment of the lost must continue as long as the life of the saved, for each is called "eternal" or "everlasting." Add to this verse 42, in which Jesus assigns them to the fire prepared for the devil and his angels, and you have endless torture by fire for everyone that ever lived except the "little flock" who believed on Jesus.

The question is: What is God's punishment for sin?

It is amazing that so few Bible teachers consider that the **debt which Christ paid for His people at the cross can only be measured by the sentence imposed on the unredeemed at Judgment Day.**

The ultimate sentence of death for sinners is typified throughout the Old Testament, especially in five portrayals: (1) The flood, (2) Sodom and Gomorrah, (3) Jericho, (4) The Deliverance from Egypt, and (5) Animal sacrifice.

1. While the wicked who perished in the flood had some moments of fear and terror before they finally drowned, there was no prolonged suffering, nor was their suffering the purpose of the flood; rather, it was brought about for their destruction.

2. Jude writes that Sodom and Gomorrah are set forth as an example of the judgment, “suffering the punishment of eternal fire” (vs. 7). The fire went out five thousand years ago when the cities ceased to exist, but its effect was eternal. Its purpose was to destroy the inhabitants, not to subject them to prolonged torture. Jesus also used the destruction of these cities by fire as an example of the final judgment. (Luke 17: 29, 30) Surely God intended to teach us something here about the destruction of the unsaved, who are to be cast into the lake of fire, which is called the “second death” (Rev. 20: 14, 15).

3. When Jericho was destroyed, no prisoners were taken and no effort was made to put them to torture. All were destroyed save Rahab and her house, who were spared because of her faith.

4. The night before the Hebrews left Egypt, the firstborn of the Egyptians died. There is no indication that they suffered — they just died. The firstborn of the Hebrews were spared because they sacrificed a lamb, which typified the death of Jesus who would come to pay the penalty for sin. It was death, not torture, that was to settle the account between the sinner and the God of justice.

5. In the sacrifices prescribed by Levitical law, there was no merit in making the animal suffer. It was slain in the least painful way and afterward burned up.

These sacrifices portrayed three things: (1) that the wages of sin is death—cessation of life—not torture. Christ, the Lamb of God, would suffer death as the full atonement for believers that they might not suffer that final death for themselves; (2) that following the final sentence of death, all will be consumed by fire, which is called the “lake of fire.” Jesus referred to it as “Gehenna” (In the King James Version this is mistranslated “hell”). Gehenna was Jerusalem’s dumping ground where the waste was consumed by fire; (3) that Jesus would pay the penalty of sin by death. Although He suffered shame, grief, contempt, injustice, rejection and the torture of the cross, none of these had any atoning value before God. It was His death that satisfied the absolute law that said, “The wages of sin is death.” The very first lie, spoken by Satan to refute God, was, “Thou shall NOT surely die.”

Still, many good brethren seem to believe, on a rational level, that if the suffering in fire is not endless for the wicked, then bliss will not be endless for the righteous. Men generally speak of all the lost as “wicked”, forgetting that the lost includes **all** people of all ages who are not believers in Jesus, and thus are without redemption, even though they may have lived exemplary lives.

Also, we must not overlook the fact that if perpetual torture were to be the order, then God would have to be the torturer to maintain life under such conditions. Such a concept dishonors God and His justice.

It is true that Jesus said “eternal punishment,” but does this imply a process of punishing that is endless? The answer is, No. We must not confuse the process with the result. Let us compare some other scriptures which describe action said to be eternal.

*Eternal Judgment.* Heb. 6:2. The process of judging does not continue to go on. It is the result of the judgment that is endless.

*Eternal Redemption.* Heb.9:12. Christ does not continue the act of redeeming in eternity, because redemption took place in Christ’s sacrifice, once and for all (Heb. 9:25, 26), never to be repeated. The result of the redemptive process is what is eternal.

*Eternal Inheritance.* Heb. 9:15. Obviously it is not a continuous process of probating the will, but our inheritance will be ours eternally.

*Eternal Salvation.* Heb. 5:9. Salvation is already a reality, the result of Christ’s work. He will not continue saving people in the age to come, but those who are saved by His atonement will remain eternally saved.

*Eternal Destruction.* 2 Thess. 1:9. This will take place when Jesus comes, and once the rebels are destroyed, the act of destruction will cease. However, the result of that act will remain, as they will be everlastingly destroyed.

*Eternal Punishment.* Matt. 25:46. As in the cases above, the act itself happens in a fixed period of time but the results last forever. It is not eternal punishing but eternal punishment, which is death, the cessation of life and extinction of the person forever. The process of punishing stops, but the punishment of death is eternal.

God’s justice is met, not by perpetual torture, but by the death of the guilty party. This is why the death of Jesus is of paramount importance: Because the punishment for our sin has been sustained by Jesus in His death, we look to His coming with joy rather than fear, assured of a resurrection to life that is glorious, eternal, and in His very image.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23).

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