

# The Final Fire

By

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One of the wonders of modern man is that in spite of access to the best Bible concordances and dictionaries in history, the majority of religious people believe in eternal torment in a perpetual fire for the unsaved. Bill Graham once said on television that people cannot get out of going to a hell of torment by being cremated because the Bible says that the soul is immortal and will live in one of two places forever, either in heaven or in hell. Of course, he failed to substantiate his statement with chapter and verse, possibly because he could find none.

The Biblical record states that: “God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen. 2:7). Nowhere does scripture suggest that God created man, then gave him a “soul”—something immaterial and immortal and capable of private life apart from the body. What it says is that man, created by body plus breath-of-life, **is a living soul**.

In the teaching of Jesus which we have on record, there was never any suggestion that man was to survive death by any inherent immortality but that Christ had power to give him life after death by means of a resurrection. Repeatedly He said that on the basis of man’s faith, He would “raise him up at the last day.” It was resurrection that was preached by Paul and the other apostles, not soul-immortality. It was this resurrection teaching that made the gospel so objectionable to the Greeks, who, from the days of Homer, had developed the philosophy of something called the soul that survived death.

Plato developed the idea and described the rewards and punishments of the soul after death and accepted the transmigration of the soul into other human and animal bodies as taught by the Pythagoreans and as is now accepted by many of the “New Age” mentality. The doctrine was further refined by Plato’s pupils and followers like Athenagoras (186), Minucius Felix (220), Tertullian (235), Hippolytus (238), Cyprian (258), Athanasius (373), Ambrose (397), Chrysostom (407), Jerome (420), and Augustine (430 AD).

In the words of Oskar Kristeller in his book, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*, Columbia University Press, 1979, “The Christian doctrine of immortality is not found in Scripture, but in the work of the early apologist and Church Fathers, from Justinus Martyr to Augustine....The Christian notion of the immortality of the soul, as it was finally formulate by Augustine, is clearly derived from that of Plato and Neoplatonists...it became a part of standard medieval doctrine, more or less taken for granted by everybody, and especially by the followers of Augustine, but it was rarely challenged or discussed in detail.” Fortunately, there are many today who are now willing to discuss the subject from a scriptural viewpoint.

In order to protect the Augustine/Plato concept of immortality, it was incorporated into creeds and catechism. For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith (of the Presbyterian Church), 1983, states: “The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption, but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being

then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledges none.”

This “confession” presents several problems: (1) It indicates pre-existence of “souls” by saying they “return to God who gave them.” This contradicts Genesis 2:7 which describes a soul as coming into existence with the combining of body and breath-of-life. (2) It is self-contradictory, stating that all souls return to God and at the same time the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, described as a place of utter darkness. Does this mean to teach that God dwells in such a place? (3) It denies the purpose of judgment, for the lost are already suffering punishment before the resurrection to judgment.

In order to hold to the traditional “Perpetual Torture of the Lost” theory and at the same time maintain the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, the thought has emerged that the unsaved, at the resurrection, must be given a body that is impervious to death—sort of an asbestos body that can always be burning and yet never burn up!

Such a concept refutes scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments. In Old Testament history fire was used to destroy but never to torture. The “whole burnt offering” was typical of the judgment, indicating the fact that the unredeemed sinner is to be executed and burned up, not preserved. In the parables of Jesus, fire is used to burn up the unproductive branches (John 15:6) and to burn up the tares at the end of the harvest (Mt. 13:40). Jesus compared the final fire to the fires of Gehenna, the pit outside Jerusalem where garbage was dumped to be consumed and destroyed by fire and maggots. This became a horrible symbol of the end of the wicked (Mt. 5:22). The meaning is made clear when Jesus warns us not to fear those who can only kill the body, but rather to fear God “who can destroy both life and body in Gehenna” (Mt. 10:28). Surely the extinction of the whole human being is indicated here. The fire of Gehenna does not torture but rather consumes and destroys. The wages of sin is death!

In spite of all the statements to the effect that the unredeemed are to be destroyed and that death is their end, many contend that it will be only a “spiritual death,” that it will be a separation from God, but a continuing existence in some form of tortured and miserable life. But, according to Rev. 20:14, the very state of death ceases to be, as “death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire.” In the final state of things, “death shall be no more” (Rev. 21:4). Paul wrote that death is an enemy and will finally be abolished (I Cor. 15:26).

In the Bible the wicked are never compared with anything that has life. They are compared to chaff (Psa. 1:4, Mt. 3:12); to the fat of lambs (Psa. 37:20); to dead branches (John 15:6); to stubble (Isa. 47:14); and to tares bound in bundles to burn (Mt. 13:40). God does not raise the unsaved to torture them forever but to judge them and condemn them to death (II Peter 3:7; Rev. 20:11–15).

The apostle Paul says in II Thess. 1:7–10, “When the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels inflaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the lord and from the glory of his power.” This, added to the many statements of Jesus that only His believers are to have

eternal life, surely indicates that the unredeemed are to pass out of existence, not to be sustained in some vast prison of fire to be endlessly tortured forever.

But what about “eternal punishment” mentioned in Mt. 25:46? It remains true, of course. The unsaved suffer eternal punishment, the punishment of death. It is eternal punishment, not eternal punishing.

In Jude 7 Sodom and Gomorrah “are set forth as an example, suffering the punishment of eternal fire.” The fire did not continue to burn after the cities were consumed, but it was eternal in its work, as those cities were destroyed forever. This is given as an example of the fate of the unredeemed.

One reason universalism (the doctrine that ultimately all are to be saved) is becoming more popular is that because thinking people cannot reconcile what the Bible says about the just nature of God with the medieval doctrine of a torture chamber where the majority of all humanity of all time will be inflicted with everlasting pain! Such a view does not harmonize with the Creator described in scripture nor with His purpose as demonstrated by Jesus. But neither does universalism. What does fit is the teaching of Jesus that there will be a judgment in which all who are not reconciled to God will be eliminated from the scene, leaving a world in which all are at home with God and in perfect peace with Him.

Christ died on the cross to meet the penalty for sin. The penalty to be executed on the sinner must be, in essence, the same as the penalty paid by the Redeemer, and that certainly was not perpetual torture but death.

The Golden Text says it all” “For God so loved the world that He have His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Man is mortal, and if he is to have immortal life, it must be given to him by the Great Life-Giver, Jesus. Otherwise, he will perish in the final fire.

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