

# JUDGMENT AND JUSTICE

By

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In a recent poll it was found that, while most people polled believe there is such a place as hell, less than four percent had any fear that they themselves might go there. It would appear that most people, although giving lip service to the doctrine as generally taught, have managed to rationalize it away, at least as a possible threat to anyone except the notoriously wicked.

In view of corruption in business and government and the ignoring of moral standards in society, it is obvious that little thought is given to the judgment and punishment for sin.

The common idea of hell is described in *The Encyclopedia Americana* as “the abode of evil spirits; the infernal regions...with lost and condemned souls go after death to suffer indescribable torments and eternal punishment...It is the place of divine revenge, un-tempered, never ending.” Dante Alighieri, who lived from 1265 to 1321 AD, crystallized this concept in his famous book, *The Divine Comedy*, in which he portrayed hell as filled with naked people being tortured by Satan and his angels. Sinners are portrayed writhing in flames, submerged headfirst in boiling vats of liquid, and pierced and tortured by the demons’ pitchforks. All of this is supposed to satisfy God’s justice and make the saints in heaven extremely happy, as declared by Johnathan Edwards in his famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

For centuries Christians have tried to reconcile the Bible description of a loving and just God with this doctrine of perpetual torture of all people who have failed to hear and obey the gospel. Unable to accept the idea of torture by literal fire, many have concluded that the punishment will be spiritual existence in a state of loneliness and misery. For example, C. S. Lewis, in his popular work, *The Great Divorce*, pictures the lost as continuing to have life, of some sort, but ever drifting farther and farther into space, totally alone. He fails to consider the fact that there can be no life without God to sustain it. In spite of this fact, of which we often are reminded in the Bible, the destiny of sinners is still said to be a life of “spiritual death” or “eternal separation from God” — neither expression, by the way, being found in scripture.

The unreasonable, as well as unscriptural, doctrine of God keeping people locked forever in a torture pit hasn’t much effect on believers either, when we consider the great number who profess belief but have little regard for Christ’s commandments. No one has been able to explain what purpose would be served by the Creator in giving life to His creatures in order to keep them forever under such conditions.

However, instead of discarding the doctrine of judgment and eternal punishment, or ignoring it as is generally done, we should seek to find out what the sentence of punishment is and the purpose of it.

From Genesis to Revelation, scripture presents the punishment for sin as death, with no qualifying terms. Concerning the forbidden tree, God said, “The day that thou shalt eat thereof thou shalt surely die.”<sup>1</sup> In passing sentence, He said to Adam, “Dust thou

art and unto dust thou shall return.”<sup>2</sup> He said nothing about spiritual death nor anything to suggest that Adam would live on in a state of misery.

Examples of God’s punishment of the wicked are found throughout Old Testament history: the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, the pagan city of Jericho. In each case God’s judgment was the sentence of death which was carried out without any prolonged torture of the condemned. David encouraged the saints by saying that the wicked are to be “cut off” and “shall not be,” that they “shall perish,” that “they shall consume; in smoke shall they consume away” and that “they shall be destroyed together.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus used simple language in warning of the fate of unbelievers. They are to perish;<sup>4</sup> they are to be cast into Gehenna<sup>5</sup> (erroneously translated hell in some Bibles). Gehenna, shortened from “Valley of Hinnom,” was a deep gorge south of Jerusalem, notorious for its horrible history. In the days of Ahaz and Manasseh, it had been the site where children were sacrifice to Moloch.<sup>6</sup> In King Josiah’s reform he desecrated it with dead bodies to make sure it was never used as a place of worship again.<sup>7</sup>

Thus Gehenna had become a place fit only for waste, the garbage dump of Jerusalem. Fires were set to consume the trash, so they were never quenched, and what the fires did not consume the maggots finished off, so Jesus spoke of it as a place where the “worm dies not and the fire is not quenched.”<sup>8</sup> One thing for sure, it was not a place of life but the very picture of waste and death. All the people of Judea were familiar with Gehenna and its history, and upon hearing Jesus speak of the sinners being cast into Gehenna, they would not get the idea that He meant for them to be perpetually and forever tortured but that it would mean their total destruction.

In His parables Jesus speaks of the unsaved being cast into the furnace to be burned up, not to be preserved for torture.<sup>9</sup> The lost are cast into the fire to suffer eternal punishment.<sup>10</sup> not eternal punishing but the punishment of death, a death that is eternal.

In Paul’s letters there is not a word about eternal suffering for the lost. He writes, “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>11</sup> Many would add to God’s Word by inserting the word “spiritual” to qualify death. But Paul used the Greek word that signifies the cessation of life.

When Jesus spoke of “Gehenna fire”, He was referring to what John called the “Lake of Fire” as the place of the final death of the unredeemed. “And death and hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.”<sup>12</sup> Peter wrote plainly of the final fire at judgment, when he wrote that the earth has been “stored up for fire, being reserved against the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.”<sup>13</sup>

When viewed from scripture, minus the perpetual torture theory, the purpose of the final punishment by death of all the ungodly is seen to be in harmony with the justice and overall purpose of God.

1. It completes God’s order of things. He created with purpose that man might be in His image. He does not operate against His own nature, therefore He does not make eternal that which is contrary to that nature. In the day of judgment He gives eternal life to those who love Him and seek the life He offers.<sup>14</sup> There is no place for all the others.<sup>15</sup>

2. It satisfies the justice of an absolutely righteous God. That is just punishment for sin is death is demonstrated by the death of Jesus, which also demonstrates God’s love. The Hebrew writer clearly states that Jesus was born a flesh and blood man, “that by the grace of God he should taste of death for every men.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus was made to be sin

on our behalf,”<sup>17</sup> fulfilling the prophecy that He would bear our sins and “pour out his life unto death.”<sup>18</sup>

Jesus did not endure perpetual punishment but suffered the punishment of death, so that God “might himself be just and the justifier of him that has faith in Jesus.”<sup>19</sup> regarding final punishment, John Locke wrote, “By death, some men understand endless torments in hell fire, but it seems a strange way understanding a law which requires the plainest and directness of words, that by death should be meant eternal life in misery.”<sup>20</sup>

3. It finally and totally eradicates all that is evil and opposed to the holiness and goodness of God. It is unreasonable and contrary to scripture to suppose that God will forever tolerate evil and even perpetuate the lives of evil men so they can forever continue in their hatred of His holiness.

John the Baptist portrayed Jesus as the landowner who gathers up the wheat and cleanses the threshing floor by burning up the chaff.<sup>21</sup> In the parable of the pounds, Jesus is the King who has the rebels slain, since no kingdom can have harmony as long as it gives place to rebels.<sup>22</sup> Peter explains that after the ungodly are destroyed in the final burning, there is to be a “new heavens and a new earth wherein dwells righteousness.”<sup>23</sup> Even death itself, as the “last enemy”, is finally abolished.<sup>24</sup>

As part of the “blessed hope” we can look forward to a time when there is no place and no creature in the universe that is not in harmony with our glorious Creator/Father, that “God may be all in all.”

## REFERENCES

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