

## A Place Called Gehenna

By

Curtis Dickinson

How do we reconcile the fact of God's great love and mercy for His creatures with the common teaching that all who fail to enter the kingdom will be subjected to the most excruciating torture imaginable, and that this will continue for ever and ever with no end?

The torture scenarios presented through the years would make the atrocities of Stalin and Chairman Mao look like acts of Charity. For example, Tertullian, writing about 220 A.D., and one of the first to teach eternal torture, wrote: "How shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult when I behold so many proud monarchs and fancied gods, groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness...liquefying in the fiercer fires than they ever kindled against Christians...?" (Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, Vol. I Ch. 15, p. 537).

The medieval view of hell portrayed a place filled with "black things as devils, that ever maul them and afflict and harass them with all kinds of tortures; and tailed drakes, horrible as devils, that devour them whole and spew them out afterwards before and behind. At other times they rend them in pieces and chew each gobbet of them, and they afterwards become whole again," and other horrible acts, all going on for ever (S.M. Brown, *Medieval Europe*, Harcourt & Brace).

The perpetual torture doctrine had no greater champion than the 18<sup>th</sup> century preacher, Jonathan Edwards, who said, "Hell is a spiritual and material furnace of fire where its victims are exquisitely tortured in their minds and in their bodies." He said that they will "suffer to all eternity...It will be their fixed abode" (R.L. Whitelaw, *Death, Resurrection, Immortality, Judgment*). What is most amazing is that he claimed that this horrible torture will "exult the happiness, the love, and the joyful thanksgiving of the angels and men that are saved. I am ready to think that...the sight of the great miseries of those...that are damned will double the ardour of their love and fullness of joy of the elect angels and men" (Ibid).

Jesus spoke of the final judgment and destruction of unbelievers by fire. He compared them to withered branches: "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:6, Compare Mt. 7:19). He compared them to tares (weeds): "As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of the world" (Mt. 13:40).

In the Sheep and Goats parable, those on the left hand are to depart "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mt. 25:31-46). A study of the Greek word "aionios", translated "eternal," reveals that it refers to the result of process, that is, the result of the fire is eternal, so that the unsaved perish for ever (see Heb. 5:9, 6:2, 9:12). The example of and "eternal" fire is given in Jude 7, where it is said that Sodom was destroyed by "eternal fire," since its results were to last for ever.

Literal fire is used in the final judgment, according to Peter: "But the heavens and earth, which are now, by the same word have been stored up for fire, being reserved against the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (II Peter 3:7).

Finally, the unsaved are to be cast into the “lake of fire,” where they meet the “second death” (Rev. 20:14–15).

There are some 70 cases in Scripture where fire is used as judgment upon wickedness, or in a sacrifice for sin, and in every case except two the fire was a figure or an agent of destruction. Never was it used for the purpose of torture. In the sacrifice of the “whole burnt offering,” for example, the remains of the animal were burned to nothing but ashes (Lev. 1:17). This was to typify the final destruction of the unsaved at judgment.

Then, where comes the idea that God preserves the unsaved alive for ever in order to keep them in perpetual fire, something even the most sinful person would not do unless he were totally depraved? Scripture used to support this idea is found in Mark 9:43 and 48 where Jesus speaks of those cast into Gehenna (erroneously translated as *hell*) “where their worm dies not and the fire is not quenched.” Many take these expressions to mean that one cast into the fire cannot die and therefore must burn there for ever.

**Unquenchable Fire.** It is amazing that anyone should assume that because the fire cannot be quenched, it will never cease to burn, and stranger still to suppose that one cast into this fire will live there for ever without being burned up.

In declaring the destruction of ancient Idumae, south-east of Judea, the prophet Isaiah wrote: “and the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into brimstone, and the land thereof shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever...” (Isa. 34:9). Yet the fire went out when the destruction was completed, and no smoke ascends from there today.

God warned Judah of coming destruction: “Then will I kindle a fire in the gates thereof, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched” (Jer. 17:27). This prophecy was fulfilled, as described in II Chronicles 3:19–21. The citizens could not quench the fire, and it burned until it consumed all that would burn. Less than a century later Jerusalem and the temple were rebuilt.

Then what does the Bible mean by “unquenchable fire?” It means a fire that will destroy totally and which cannot be quenched, but will burn up all that is cast into it until it goes out for lack of fuel.

The expression, “unquenchable fire,” is used throughout the Bible to signify a fire that consumes (Ezek. 20:4, 48), reduces to nothing (Amos 5:5), or burns up something (Mt. 3:12).

**Undying Worms.** Many are the bizarre ideas taken from the statement, “their worm dies not.” John Calvin wrote that the “plain meaning” is that the wicked will be tormented without end by a bad conscience (Edward Fudge, *The fire that Consumes*, page 113). Johannes Pederson comments: “when the worms gnaw the dead body, the soul feels it” (Ibid, page 112). Some claim that the worm is the soul of the sinner, and this shows that the soul can never die. (Ridiculous!)

Such weird interpretations show how far some are willing to go in order to uphold their position (identical to some pagan religions) of perpetual torture of the unsaved. The way to interpret scripture is to compare all other scripture, and when this is done, such fanciful ideas vanish.

In speaking of the place where “the worm dies not and the fire is not quenched,” Jesus used the word *Gehenna*, which comes from the Hebrew “Gai Hinnom, meaning

“valley of Hinnom.” This identifies a narrow ravine south-west of Jerusalem, once notorious for the worship of Moloch, where children were “passed through the fire” in sacrifice. King Josiah of ancient Judah put an end to these abominations and defiled the valley, making it ceremoniously unclean (II Kings 23:10). It later became the city dump of Jerusalem, the repository of refuse and animal carcasses, including dead criminals no one claimed for burial.

Fires burned continuously to consume this mass of corruption. What the flames left, the worms consumed. Here the word for worm is properly translated *maggot*, and while the life of an individual maggot is short, there was never a time when the garbage was not alive with them, hence the expression: “their worm dies not.”

In using this expression Jesus was echoing a warning of God’s judgment given centuries earlier by Isaiah: “And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind” (Isa. 66:24). This is a reference to dead bodies being consumed by worms and fire. Since the fire is not “quenched” it completely consumes all that it feed upon. Both Isaiah and Jesus present a picture of a place where life ends in shame, not a place where life goes on for ever in unspeakable misery.

While many traditionalists object that a final and irreversible death is not sufficient punishment, it is universally conceded that capital punishment (death) is the most severe punishment. The thought of total death, to cease to be, is almost impossible to perceive, and is the greatest tragedy that can happen to a living soul, who might otherwise have received the marvelous gift of eternal life in glorious immortality.

Praise God that an escape from such a fate is provided through Jesus, His Son, who took our sins and died our death, that we might receive the gift of immortal life, and all the glories of the world to come (Rom. 6:23, 2:7; I Cor. 15:54).

“He that believes in the Son has eternal life; but he that obeys not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36).

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