

GOD'S TRUTH OR PAGAN TRADITION?

By

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In most churches there is a doctrine of unending punishment for the lost, although it has grown foggier in recent years and is seldom talked about. Most modern theologians no longer believe in a literal hell of fire, but teach that those in hell suffer an eternity of “spiritual separation from God.”

It is not the purpose of this article to discuss the three or four verses in the Bible that are used to uphold the traditional doctrine that all the unredeemed are destined to unending torture in hell; this I have done in several previous issues of *THE WITNESS*. Rather, I would discuss the source of this doctrine and some of its implications.

The doctrine of endless punishment is not found anywhere in the story of the Patriarchs, in the Law, in Psalms, or in the Prophets. Yet the doctrine was prominent among the heathen, from the time of Abraham on through the New Testament period. They had a place known by various names: Orcus, Erebus, Tartarus, Infernus, which they believed to be below the earth, inhabited by monsters, as well as the miserable human beings.

Early Greek and Roman rulers claimed that in preparing their laws they had communications with the gods: Apollo, Jupiter, Egeria, Minerva, etc. Their admitted purpose was to impress the minds of the populous with religious fear in order to keep them under control. Augustine, in “City of God,” stated that the princes “out of their wisdom and civil prudence” deceived the people under the name of religion “to believe those things true, which they themselves knew to be idle fable ... for their own ease in government.”

It is remarkable that while belief in endless torment was prominent in the pagans that surrounded them, not a trace of it was found among the Patriarchs or in Israel. It was only after the Israelites had become corrupted and had adopted pagan concepts that this doctrine began to appear in their literature – not in the Bible, but in rabbinical literature.

Historian Mosheim, speaking of the 5th century, says, “As no one objected to Christians retaining the opinions of their pagan ancestors...and as no one proposed utterly to abolish the ancient Pagan institutions, but only to alter them somewhat and purify them; it was unavoidable that the religion and the worship of the Christians should in this way become corrupted.”

The apostle Paul warned against Greek philosophy. In his sermon at Athens and in his letters to the church at Corinth he emphasized the resurrection as man's only hope, a sharp refutation of Plato's teaching of the immortality of the soul.

Historians are in general agreement that soon after the rise of Christian faith, converts who were educated in the schools of the philosophers, began to weave the doctrines of the Grecian sects, especially Platonism, in with Christ's teaching. Augustine (354- 430) was the first to argue that the word *aionios*, in Matt. 25, meant endless punishing. The

primitive truth was officially condemned in a Church council in A.D. 553 (or 540), and the doctrine of endless punishing was sanctioned as a fundamental article of Christian faith. At this same council it was established that “mankind, in the resurrection, will rise in an erect posture.” Such was the wisdom of those “scholars.”

The New Catholic Encyclopedia in its article “Soul, Human, Immortality Of,” says that early Church Fathers found support for belief in an immortal soul, not in the Bible, but in “the poets and philosophers and general tradition of Greek thought...Later, the scholastics preferred to make use of Plato or principles from Aristotle.” It states that “the influence of Platonic and Neo-platonic thought” – including belief in the immortal soul – eventually was inserted “into the very core of Christian theology.”

If the doctrine of endless punishing be true, then one would expect God's word to be filled with warnings of such a fate from Genesis to Revelation, Not so. There is not one single verse in all the Old Testament that even remotely suggests anything like endless punishment. There are repeated warnings of judgment for disobedience, but nothing about a place of endless punishment.

At the very outset God warned Adam and Eve: “you may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16-17). That's it. Death! But the traditional doctrine holds that instead of death, God intended to keep them alive forever and subject them to horrible suffering, suffering that would never cease – unending punishment.

Who can believe that Yahweh, God of Justice, would place man, His noblest creature, created in His own image, at risk of such infinite and horrible consequences, than give a warning that was totally misleading? To say, “you shall surely die,” is far different from saying, “you shall be subject to the torments of an endless hell.”

Jesus taught us to expect God to treat us with the kind of consideration we would give to our own children (Matt. 7:9-11). Would any earthly parent, if the immortal salvation of his children were at risk, make such a false and misleading statement? Would he not rather make it crystal clear that disobedience would result in the terror of unending punishing? Can it be possible that our Holy Father would have such a horrible fate in store for people, and yet never once even so much as mention it?

The flood in the time of Noah (Gen. 6-8) is a basic example of God's judgment, in which God declared that the people were to be destroyed, including everything that had breath (6:11-17). If they were not only destroyed by the flood, but were then subjected to ceaseless torture, is it not strange that no mention is made of this? Everything else is related in detail – even the heights of the waters and the number of days they prevailed. Is it possible that the most terrible part of the judgment, the indescribable and endless suffering, would be omitted?

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is said by the inspired writer, Jude, to be set forth as an example of God's judgment of the wicked (Jude 7). If the lost are to suffer endless punishing, here would be a proper occasion for it to be revealed. But there is no such warning given the Sodomites, and the record (Gen. 19:24-25) contains no hint of such punishment.

It cannot be argued that they went on to suffer in a spiritual sense, for the Bible clearly says that the fire that destroyed them was the punishment. Also, Jude says that what they suffered was set forth as an example. It does NOT furnish any example of unending torment.

Several things are at stake here: the truth, the fate of the lost, and the very character of God. To love Jesus is to love truth, for He said, "I am the truth." Those who receive not the love of the truth perish, and receive a "working of error, that they should believe a lie" (2 Thess. 2:10:11). Should we not be deeply concerned that the church in large measure has believed Satan's great lie: "You shall not surely die" (Gen. 3:4)?

Many think that by presenting the hideous teaching of endless torture they will cause people to flee in terror to God. Such has not happened. Those who confess Christ only because they are in fear of endless punishing are seeking fire insurance. Not a fellowship with our Heavenly Father. The world is full of people who are afraid of hell, but have no interest in a daily personal walk with God. Fear is the tool of cult leaders. "It is the goodness of God that leads (you) to repentance" (Rom. 2:4). It is the good news that is the "power of God unto salvation."

Yahweh, our holy and righteous God, is portrayed throughout scripture as being just and merciful. His purity and righteousness are demonstrated by Jesus, His son. Unending punishment requires a god who will subject the unredeemed to unbearable ghastly suffering, and make it impossible for them to die or ever be relieved of their torment. Such a doctrine shames and dishonors God, while giving support to pagan dogma.

God's message is clear: "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). Endless punishment requires that those who suffer it must possess immortality, but according to the bible immortality is to be conferred only upon the redeemed in the day of resurrection. "The soul that sins shall die" (Ezek. 18:20). When scripture speaks of impenitent people cast into Gehenna or the Lake of Fire, it is using symbolic language to refer to the final sentence of the "second death" (Rev. 20:14, 21:8) which is permanent death.

Judgment is sure and the Judge is just. His justice demands an accounting for sin. The wages of sin is death, a death that is final and eternal. But God is merciful, and in His love has provided a Redeemer that we sinners might be justified. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

What marvelous grace of our glorious God! What a wonderful Savior and blessed hope in which to rejoice!

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