

GOD'S CLEANSING FIRE

By

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Of 421 articles in THE WITNESS since its beginning, the one's sparking the greatest interest has been those dealing with the final destiny of man: resurrection to immortality or resurrection to judgment and destruction.

Recent debate on the subject has been stirred by a Church of England report which said that the traditional images of Hell as an eternal torment were wrong, but everyone would still face a day of judgment and final death.

It was reported in 1989 that of some 400 theologians who were meeting together that year, over half of them rejected the traditional doctrine of hell. Since that time many Christians have been trying to reconcile their church's teaching on hell with what the scripture says. It isn't always possible.

Many of these theologians do not accept the Bible as God's final word, so their doctrine is not standard for the rest of us who believe the Bible to be God's revelation. The problem still won't go away.

Just whose doctrine of hell fits the biblical version? C. H. Spurgeon, who is widely read by preachers today, once wrote: "When thou die thy soul will be tormented alone; that will be a hell for it; but at the day of judgment thy body will join thy soul, and then thou wilt have twin hells...thy head tormented with pains; thine eyes starting from their sockets with sights of blood and woe; thine ears tormented with sullen moans and hollow groans, and shrieks of tortured ghosts;...thy limbs crackling like the martyrs in fire, and yet unburnt; thyself put in a vessel of hot oil, pained, yet coming out undestroyed...every nerve a string on which the devil shall ever play his diabolical tune of hell's unutterable lament...There is a real fire in hell, as truly as you have a real body; a fire exactly like that we have on earth in everything except this-that it will not consume, though it will torment you!"

Spurgeon's description is not found anywhere in the Bible, and contradicts it in several ways. It has "souls" being cast into the fire before the day of judgment. It places the punishment under the devil, whereas scripture places judgment under the power of Jesus the Son. Spurgeon says that the fire of hell will not "consume," but according to scripture that's the purpose of it.

Many have abandoned Spurgeon's "real fire in hell" and re-imaged the punishment as mental and spiritual suffering, thus eliminating any meaning to the biblical reference to fire.

But what does Scripture teach about the final fire? There are a number of scriptures to describe what will happen to the unsaved.

Matthew 3:12 – John the Baptist compared judgment to harvest time, and said of Jesus, “He will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Matthew 13:24-43 – Jesus also compared judgment to the harvest, in which the reapers are told to “gather first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them.” Jesus explained that the harvest is the end of the world, and the tares are those who “do iniquity” who will be cast into the fire, obviously to be destroyed like the tares.

John 15:6 – Jesus compares the wicked to a fruitless branch that is cut from the tree and thrown into the fire to be burned.

2 Peter 3:7 – Peter writes that the present heavens and earth “have been stored with fire, being reserved against the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.”

Hebrews 6:8 compares the wicked to the thorns and thistles “whose end is to be burned.”

Jude 7 reveals that Sodom and Gomorrah are “are set forth as an example, suffering the punishment of eternal fire.” The object of the fire was to destroy the cities, which were completely consumed. The result of the fire will be eternal; hence it is called “eternal fire.”

Jesus, when speaking of the final destiny of the lost, used the term Gehenna, the fiery pit outside of Jerusalem where garbage was thrown to be consumed and destroyed; and which had become a symbol of the fate of the wicked (Matt. 5:22). That He meant total extinction is made clear when He says we are not to fear those who can only kill the body, but rather to fear God, “who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna” (Matt. 10:28).

The Old Testament scriptures also portray God’s use of fire in judgment. Malachi warns: “all the proud, and all that work wickedness, shall be stubble; and the day that comes shall burn them up and shall leave them neither root nor branch” (Mal. 4:1). David sang that “the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of Jehovah shall be as the fat of lambs; they shall consume: in smoke shall they consume away” (Psalms 37:20).

Whether the fire of Judgment Day is what we know as fire, or is used symbolically, the message is clear, that the unredeemed are to be destroyed (not tortured), that sin might forever be eliminated from God’s creation.

There are cases in scripture where something or someone, was subject to fire without being consumed. Moses was confronted with a burning bush which was not consumed (Exodus 3:2). The bush represented the power of the Creator, Who is said to be a consuming fire, but is able to save His people from destruction.

In the well-known story of Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego, these men were thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to bow to Nebuchadnezzar’s idols. God protected the three faithful men from the fire, but it was so fierce that it slew the soldiers who were in

charge (Dan. 3:19-24). Here is an illustration of God using fire for the destruction of His enemies, while protecting the faithful.

There is no record in the Bible of God ever having tortured His enemies. It is hard to imagine that God, who loved sinners so much that He gave His precious Son to die for them, would have a torture chamber in the new creation where He would keep alive the vast majority of mankind (perhaps 5 billion) in order to torture them endlessly!

Why, then, do so many believe in the perpetual torture of the lost? Some say it comes from Christ's words in Matthew 25:46; "These shall go away into eternal punishment: but the righteous into eternal life." However, the punishment for sin is death, and here Jesus speaks of that punishment (death) being eternal and irrevocable. This is the opposite of life under torturous conditions. The promise of immortality (everlasting existence, or eternal life) is made ONLY to true believers.

If the doctrine of perpetual torture cannot be adequately supported by Scripture, where did it come from? The historian Herodotus, born 484 BC, wrote that "the Egyptians were the first to accept the belief that the soul of man is immortal." Plato, born in 429 BV, studied their philosophy in Egypt, and upon his return to Greece began to teach the immortality of the soul in Greek schools. It was adopted by the Romans, and brought into the church by Tertullian, Origen, and Augustine. Eventually it was written into the creeds. With the belief that the unredeemed are immortal and cannot die, it was necessary to invent the doctrine that they would live "in hell" forever. This, in spite of Revelation 20:14 which states that being cast into the lake of fire is the "second death," not a continuing life.

The Bible does NOT teach that in eternity there will be a heaven and hell coexisting side-by-side! Rather it teaches that sin and its curse, along with its penalty of death, will be eliminated completely from God's creation. Being condemned to total and final death is a very grim prospect, but God, in mercy, offers a means of escape through faith in Jesus the Savior. "The Lord preserves all them that love him; but all the wicked will he destroy" (Psalms 145:20). All evil and unrighteousness will be utterly consumed at Christ's return. God's people, those redeemed by His Son, will be protected from the cleansing fire, and transformed into His likeness (1 John 3:2-3), fulfilling God's eternal purpose.

"And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away, and there was no more sea" (Rev. 21:2).

"Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for a new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwells righteousness" (2 Pet. 3:13). *To God be the glory!*

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