

PUNISHMENT WITH PURPOSE

By

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The Bible teaches that there must be a reckoning, a day of judgment, a time of justice in which sin is punished and righteousness rewarded. This teaching is in harmony with all of the Divine scheme of the creator and must be understood in the light of His eternal purpose.

This the religious world fails to do, and largely presents the punishment of unbelievers as vindictive – a spurned God seeking revenge, who keeps the sinner alive forever in the most gruesome state of torture imaginable. Theologians are ever trying to explain why a just and righteous God would do this, as it serves no apparent purpose, and has a negative impact upon the nature of God. Last year the Church of England made world headlines by announcing that it was abandoning this position because “some are disturbed by such traditional teaching.” I agree with their action, but have to disagree with their purpose. If God taught that people would be tortured eternally, then we would be bound to believe it, but it isn’t taught in the Bible, and we are bound to teach the truth on the subject, to the best of our understanding.

The purpose often given for the perpetual torture of the unsaved is that the threat of such state is necessary to drive the sinner to God. But if one seeks refuge with God only because he desires to escape suffering, he still will be defeating the Creator’s purpose for his life. One is transformed into God’s image (the stated desire and purpose of God) through a desire to be like Him, and thus turning to Him in love. Those who profess Jesus and go to church because of a fear of punishment have failed to take the first step in pleasing God. Jesus said that the first and great commandment is: “Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy mind” (Matt. 22:31). John reminds us: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love castes out fear, because fear has punishment: and he that fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

An evangelist once wrote to me that teaching eternal suffering and torture of the lost was the only way to bring some people to Christ, and that to deny this endless torture would cause them to continue as unbelievers. Obviously, this hellish lie has not stemmed the tide of sin. In fact, by telling the world that God will torture people unendingly without hope of escape and with no purpose in view causes many to turn away from the church. In the words of Steven Clark Goad, “God gave some of us enough reasoning power to see that making God out to be some devilish tormentor of honest believers who have been deceived by a few clergymen just doesn’t wash well.”

The purpose of driving Adam from the Garden of Eden is explicitly stated by God – to keep Adam from eating of the tree of life and thus living forever (Gen. 3:22-21). This was in keeping with the warning: “Thou shall surely die,” of Genesis 2:17. Some define

this death as “spiritual separation from God” which would negate the purpose of driving him from the physical means of life.

Mainstream theology speaks of an eternal or immortal soul that must live forever either in bliss or torture. Such an idea negates the meaning of such scriptures as Romans 6:23, “The wages of sin is death. but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord,” and, John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

The belief, that the wicked, as well as the saint, will live forever stems from the idea that once man has come into being, he must continue to live forever, because he has an immortal soul. The idea persists in spite of the fact that nowhere in scripture is there a statement to support it, and instead it states the opposite, that Jesus only has immortality (1 Tim. 6:16). The punishment for sin, therefore, is death – not “spiritual death” – whatever that is supposed to mean, but death of the person.

When all that God has revealed about His purpose is considered there are obvious reasons for the final punishment.

1. It is fulfillment of God’s order. The purpose of life which God has given to the creature has been voided by sin. God created man to be in His image. When man rejects that image he rejects the purpose for his existence. God does not operate against His own nature. He does not make eternal that which is opposed to His purpose: therefore, He does not continue to give life to the sinner. It is not that God threatens us with vindictive punishment if we displease Him; rather He gives life only to the creature who fulfills His purpose. One who does not desire such fulfillment forfeits any right to be given life. Hence, “The soul that sins, it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4).

2. The punishment of the sinner is for the purpose of satisfying the justice of an absolutely righteous God. That this punishment is death is adequately demonstrated by the death of Jesus, who acted in man’s place in undergoing the punishment of death on the cross. The writer of the Hebrew letter explained that Jesus was a flesh and blood man, “that by the grace of God he should taste of death for every man” (Heb. 2:14).

Jesus did not endure perpetual punishing, but He did sustain the punishment of death, thus satisfying the justice of God with regard to the penalty of sin.

The final destruction of sinners through fire in the end of the world is described by John as “the second death” (Rev. 20:14), and while it will undoubtedly entail great suffering – perhaps much more for some than for others – such judgment is left up to God who alone is able to mete punishment fit for the crime. It is sufficient to say what is revealed, that the destiny of the unbeliever will be death.

3. The final destruction of man in the Day of Judgment serves the purpose of cleansing God’s creation of all that is evil and which is not in harmony with the Creator’s purpose. John the Baptist portrayed Jesus as the landowner who gathers up the wheat and burns up

the chaff (Matt. 3:11-12). The purpose of the burning is to be rid of the chaff, and to “cleanse his threshing floor.”

Jesus pictured the rebels as being slain, since no kingdom can have peace and harmony as long as it gives place to rebels (Luke 19:27). Scripture teaches that in the last day, God will cause the heavens and the earth to be burned up, and Peter explained that this fire is for the specific purpose of the destruction of the ungodly (2 Peter 3:7-13). In the new creation described in Revelation 21 and 22, there is no place for sinners, and no need for such a place, as they will all be totally removed from God’s creation.

In the words of the Commission on Evangelism appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and York in 1913, “Ultimately all that is found valueless in God’s sight must be and will be abolished that that which He can use may be set free, and ‘God may be all in all.’ Revelation and reason alike point to this inevitable consummation. The idea of the inherent indestructibility of the human soul (or consciousness) owes its origin to the Greek, not to Bible sources. The central theme of the New Testament is eternal life, not for anybody and everybody, but for believers in Christ as risen from the dead. The choice is set before man here and now. Though the announcement of impending judgment may not at first sight appear to be ‘Good News,’ yet it is integral to the Gospel. It is the assertion of the final triumph of good and the abolition of evil.”

Jesus repeatedly spoke of the unrighteous being cast into Gehenna. All Bible students know that Gehenna was the ill-famed Valley of Hinnom used by the residents of Jerusalem as a huge incinerator, a place to dispose of everything which they wanted to be rid of. Such is the destiny of all who reject the life God offers through Christ. The final punishment is not only fair and just, but serves the perfect and eternal purpose of the Creator.

Continual torture without end, by a beneficent and righteous Heavenly Father is not only illogical and unreasonable, but also unscriptural. It is a scare tactic that has been used for centuries to try to keep in line those who neither love God nor seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. The Gospel does not appeal through fear but through love. “Perfect love casts out fear.”

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