

#254 "Is Hell Eternal, Conscious Torment?"

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The God of the Bible is revealed as loving and merciful but also as holy, just, and righteous to the extent that if any impure human saw His face he would die immediately (Exodus 33:20). There is a vast chasm between unsaved man and God because of God's holy nature and man's sin. God must pour out His just wrath on those who sin, or else He would be unjust. But in His great mercy, He demonstrated His love to sinners while they were yet sinners by sending His Son to die on the cross in their place (Romans 5:8). They can be saved if only they would turn from their sin and put their faith in the risen Christ for their salvation and forgiveness. But many spurn Christ and the cross, refusing to believe in the resurrection, and ignoring the conscience within them blaring to their souls that they are guilty of the law of God and deserving of hell for doing so (Romans 1:32).

But despite the conviction of the Spirit (Luke 12:10) and the testimony of the conscience, many suppress the truth of hell or try to redefine its nature. It is not a party place with Satan as the party master. Satan is burning as well in God's hell. Hell is not a punishment with a chance of escape or pardon, but it is permanent. Nor is it, as many in contemporary Christianity like to argue, merely a place where the eternal soul is annihilated, ceasing to exist forever. God's love does not override His sense of justice or His desire to avenge evil perpetrated against Him and against God's people. Frankly, there will be hell to pay for those who reject the Son of God. I don't say that to be curt, but rather to emphasize the point that hell is far worse than we like to think. When we see what the Bible actually teaches about hell, it will convict us more than ever to warn people about the wrath to come, just as Jesus did (Luke 3:7).

Let us begin by first reminding ourselves of the wrath of God as taught in the Scripture. John 3:36 says, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." The wrath of God is only satisfied through Christ because God poured His wrath out on Him. But those who have not applied His blood to their hearts in repentance and faith still must face God's wrath, which they will at the Great White Throne judgment (Revelation 20:11). Nahum 1:6 says, "Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the burning of His anger? His wrath is poured out like fire And the rocks are broken up by Him." The same God Who loves all people and desires that none should perish is the same God Who is full of indignation towards those who blaspheme the call of the Spirit (Matthew 12:31) upon their hearts and the work of Christ on the cross. Luke 12:49 says, "I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled!" God is anxious to avenge the righteous and punish the wicked because His just and righteous nature demands it. The wicked have gotten away with a great many things on this earth, but vengeance from on High will come. This is why believers are told not to seek revenge but to rather leave the scales of justice to God to balance in eternity (Romans 12:19). He will do this because He is righteous and just. Zephaniah 3:8 says, "'Therefore wait for Me,' declares the LORD, 'For the day when I rise up as a witness. Indeed, My decision is to gather nations, To assemble kingdoms, To pour out on them My indignation, All My burning anger; For all the earth will be devoured By the fire of My zeal.'" There is a

storing up of judgment that has happened, and it needs to be poured out, both in the last days and in eternity.

Revelation 21:8 says, "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." All whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of Life will experience the second death as they are cast into hell where the antichrist, his false prophet, and Satan are to be tormented forever and ever (Revelation 20:10-15). Revelation 19:20 makes special mention that these were thrown in alive. Revelation 14:9-12 says,

"Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, 'If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.'

From these passages in Revelation, we see that God's wrath continues to be poured out as the smoke of the suffering of all unbelievers rises up day and night, for they worshipped the devil in this life rather than God. These have no rest, not even a break at night. This is clear and strong evidence for eternal, conscious torment. If they were dead, it wouldn't make any sense to speak of them not having any rest. We see that God's wrath is mixed full strength, for it is not watered down. This tormenting happens not in some far away place but in the presence of the angels and of Jesus Christ. The same Jesus Who had compassion for the masses also is glorified in justice being meted out. He knows that if some didn't believe and repent on earth that nothing could have been done to change their minds.

This brings us to Luke 16:19-31 which says,

"Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the *crumbs* which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and *that* none may cross over from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house— for I have five

brothers—in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ But he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.’”

The clear teaching in this story spoken by Jesus Himself is that there is no escape from hell, that it is a place of torment, and that those in it are in fire with great thirst and experiencing significant agony. But let us emphasize the fact that there was no hope of changing the minds of those who have rejected the Scripture. Not even somebody rising from the dead (as Jesus would soon do Himself) could convince them to believe. People who refuse to believe deserve eternal punishment because of the hardness of their hearts. They will only bow the knee before Jesus and acknowledge Him as Lord at the judgment when it is too late (Philippians 2:10-11). Too often God’s wrath is underestimated, and the wickedness and faithlessness of people is understated. When these are given a proper viewpoint, then eternal, conscious torment seems more fitting than when we downplay their severity.

The punishment of God’s wrath of being consciously thrown into the lake of fire is also seen in the gospel accounts. Matthew 25:46 says, “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Annihilationism is eternal death, but Jesus doesn’t say the unsaved will go to eternal death as opposed to eternal life. Rather, He says that they will go to eternal punishment. Jesus says in Matthew 13:41-42, “The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” He says the same things again in Matthew 13:49-50 which says, “So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The emphasis is that there will be people crying out and gnashing their teeth in agony and anger. This is something only conscious beings can do. It is indicative not of eternal death but of eternal punishment. Acts 2:31 says, “He looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that HE WAS NEITHER ABANDONED TO HADES, NOR DID His flesh SUFFER DECAY.” Christ conquered the grave, sin, and death, and consequently His soul was not abandoned. The implication here is that Christ is the exception along with those who follow Him. All others will be abandoned to hell. You can’t abandon somebody who is already dead and who has no conscious awareness. Thus, there is inferred a feeling of hopelessness, despair, alienation, isolation, and being permanently cut off from God. 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9 affirms this idea of eternal separation from God when it says,

“For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”

Annihilated souls wouldn't care about being away from God's glory and presence forever, but eternal living souls would. Thus, eternal destruction should be understood as absolute ruin and undoing, not extinction.

From studying the Bible's teaching on hell, we are reminded that hell is not a happy or pleasant topic. In fact, it is absolutely horrific, gruesome, and terrifying, but that is what it is meant to be. Hebrews 10:26 says, "For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES." Hell should be a terrifying prospect, and the wrath of God a fearsome event (Matthew 10:28). But this shouldn't make us try to water down the doctrine of hell or write it out of the Bible. Rather, it should motivate us to warn people about the wrath to come and to proclaim the gospel with fervor. In fact, Jesus even spoke of hell when sharing the gospel. Luke 3:17-18 says, "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people." Hell is part of the gospel according to Jesus, and it is what He came to earth to spare people from. But if they are not afraid of it, why should they believe? Why should they value the sacrifice of Christ or even consider it necessary?

The reality is a great many people would choose a life of sin resulting in eternal annihilation over a life of repentance and faith in Christ resulting in eternal life. But if they believed in the eternal destruction and torment of hell, the weeping and the gnashing of teeth, the unquenchable thirst stemming from the unquenchable fire, and the utter despair and hopelessness resulting from permanently being cut off from God, they would likely be motivated to choose differently. No amount of the temporary pleasures of sin could be worth all of that. Jesus didn't come to earth to die on the cross just so that men could live forever but so that they could be saved from an eternity in hell. Salvation is not just the bonus of eternal life but being rescued from the wrath of God in hell. If the church really wants to be relevant, it can stop with the tip-toeing and watered-down nonsense and preach the hard truth in love and with grace. That is how Jesus did it, for He, like His gospel message, was always relevant, being full of grace and truth (John 1:14, 17).