

The Unquenchable Fire

By Curtis Dickinson

For centuries it has been the teaching of “orthodoxy.” of most churches, that God has created a great abyss of fire and terrors capable of holding billions of people, and that all who fail to find favor with Him will be assigned to that place and kept alive forever for the sole purpose of being perpetually tortured. Many are ashamed of this concept of “Hell” (this name is a mistranslation of scripture), and soften it by saying that the lost will be “eternally separated” or condemned to a “spiritual death.” Without question the Scripture teaches that there will be a day of judgment after which the redeemed will enjoy the blessings of eternal life and the unredeemed will be condemned to eternal death. The New Testament phraseology uses terms such as “eternal life” and “eternal salvation” in contrast to “eternal judgment” (Heb 6:2): “Eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:46), and “everlasting destruction” (2 Thess. 1:9).

The day of judgment will be a day of horror and weeping for all who have not found forgiveness through Christ the Savior, and it is a sad commentary on modern evangelists that they can speak about the final destiny of sinners with a kind of glee, as did the famous Jonathan Edwards, who held that saints would rejoice over the unspeakable misery and agony of the lost as they watched them writhing in the fires of hell! What say the Scriptures? Do they teach that the destiny of the impenitent will be unending conscious torture, or that their destiny will be total death, the end of their being?

A good place to start is by looking at God’s destroying agent, “unquenchable fire,” as used throughout the Bible. In Jeremiah 17:27 it is said that Yahweh will “kindle a fire in the gates (of Jerusalem)...and it shall not be quenched.” The fulfillment of these words is given in Jer. 52:13, which states that Nebuchadnezzar entered the city, “and all the houses of Jerusalem burned he with fire.” The fire was not quenched but went out when the fuel was consumed.

Isaiah pronounced doom upon Edom, saying that “the land thereof shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night or day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever...” (Isa. 34:10). Needless-to-say, after all was burned up, the fire went out. The smoke went up, but is not continuing to do so.

Ezekiel used the same terminology: “...thus said the Lord Yahweh: behold I will kindle a fire in thee, and it shall devour every green tree in thee, and every dry tree, the flaming flame shall not be quenched...and all flesh shall see that I, Yahweh, have kindled it; it shall not be quenched.” (Ezek. 20:47, 48). The prophecy was fulfilled, but the fires that God used have long been extinct, having accomplished their purpose. The conclusion is that God’s “fire that is not quenched” is an irresistible fire that cannot be extinguished, but will complete its work before it goes out.

When Jesus spoke of “unquenchable fire” and worms that “die not,” He was using Old Testament terminology. “And if thy hand causes thee to stumble, cut it off: it is good for thee to enter into life maimed rather than having thy two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire. And if thy foot causes thee to stumble, cut it off: it is good for thee to enter into life halt, rather than having thy two feet to be cast into Gehenna. And if thine eye causes thee to stumble, cast it out: it is good for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into Gehenna: where their worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:43-48). Here Jesus used the terms found in Isaiah: “And they shall go forth, and look upon the dead bodies of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh” (Isa. 66:24). Note four things:

1. Jesus spoke in figures and obscure sayings. He didn’t intend for anyone to cut off a hand or pluck out an eye,” but meant for them to understand that it was better to make any sacrifice rather than to lose all of life in Gehenna.

2. The people Jesus addressed had no conception of a place of perpetual torture – no such idea is found anywhere in the Old Testament – but they all knew that Gehenna was a valley just south of Jerusalem. They knew that it was not a place for the torture of living things, but a place for the destruction of whatever was thrown into it. They would understand that it symbolized complete destruction, not life in perpetual torment.

3. The worm refers to maggots. Bodies of animals, and sometimes that of a criminal, who was denied burial as an expression of contempt, might not always fall directly into the fire, and would become breeding ground for maggots, so that the worms were always present.

4. No one was allowed to disturb the fire. Nor would anyone want to, as it was considered an unclean place of shame. So the fire was never quenched, but burned until all was consumed.

Jesus was expressing the thought of the completeness and finality of the Second Death. All who suffer that death will be completely and forever destroyed. Another symbol for this is the “lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14). Neither Jesus nor Isaiah described Gehenna as many might expect, as a place where billions are alive in flames and torture. Isaiah wrote of burning “carcasses” not of living people being burned. The idea of Gehenna expressed the same, as no living thing was to be deposited there. John the Baptist also spoke of an “unquenchable fire.” “His fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly cleanse his threshing floor: and he will gather his wheat into the garner, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12). After the farmer winnows the grain, separating the wheat from the chaff (waste), fire is applied, and the chaff is burned up in a roaring flame. What else could John be depicting but the Day of Judgment, when the redeemed are safely gathered to their home, the rest are put to death, and the world is cleansed?

Traditional orthodoxy teaches the opposite, that the fire does not burn up or consume the sinner (the chaff) but that they are kept alive in order to be tortured forever. Fire is never used by God to torment, but for destruction or cleansing. The worthless trees are “cast into

the fire” to burn up (Matt. 7:19). The tares are burned up in the furnace to get rid of them, not to preserve them (Matt. 13:30-42). Sodom and Gomorrah were subjected to fire for their destruction. It is said that they suffered the “punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7), not that the fire continued to burn, but that its results were eternal. “God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29). People that are consumed could not be suffering in fire forever. Verbs and nouns used in the Bible to reveal what God will do with the impenitent, 35 in Hebrew and 33 in Greek, have one meaning which is expressed in several ways: destroyed, consumed, burned up, have no more being, brought to nothing, etc. In Exodus and Leviticus the “offering made by fire unto the Lord” was to portray the penalty for sin, but the animals were always slain before being subjected to the fire. They were never tortured. Jesus, who took the place of those offerings, went to the cross for the express purpose of meeting sin’s penalty: death. It was in His death, not in the amount of suffering He endured, that the penalty was met.

The first and great lie of Satan, “Thou shall not surely die” (Gen. 3:3), was the most deadly lie of all time. It continues to deceive multitudes in every religion today, because the concept of final destruction and cessation of being is an unthinkable horror to the human mind. “The lie” has given rise to the invention of a pagan teaching of the perpetual torture of “immortal souls.” A doctrine which may be one of Satan’s greatest victories, as it is a stumbling block to millions. When we preach that the sinner will live forever in misery and agony, we are echoing Satan’s lie that “Thou shall not surely die.” The good news is that, even though “the wages of sin is death, the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23).

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