

Thoughts on the Punishment of the Wicked

Several have privately emailed me wishing my “best” arguments for the Conditionalist position regarding the punishment of the wicked. Here they are. First, I will ask some rhetorical questions that almost answer themselves. Second, I will give you my best shot at convincing you of my understanding of the biblical position in as few words as possible. This is a labor of love and not done because I relish being marked for promoting some so-called heresy. Our present traditional view of hell, borrowed from Catholicism, Platonism and paganism, is no more biblical than the doctrine of limbo. Scriptures must be twisted to say the opposite of what they actually teach in order to keep promoting the idea that God is a loving Creator who will keep souls alive forever just to torment and torture them, souls he knew would not accept him when he created them. This is not the God of the Bible I see. Consider.

Rhetorical Questions

Why does Jesus' reference to those in danger of the fire of hell not mention that it will be "eternal" tormenting (Matthew 5:22)? And why do we make words such as "destroy" mean different things, unless it is to support a preconceived doctrine (Matthew 10:28)? If Satan is not to be feared because he can only destroy our bodies, then why are we told to fear HIM who can "destroy" both soul and body in hell, especially if we won't be "destroyed" (Matthew 10:28)? Why do we assume the word "destroy" in this verse means the exact opposite of its normal meaning? Why do we assume "destroy" here means to live on and on eternally and yet not be destroyed?

Why does not the translation of words meaning grave (Sheol & Hades) and garbage pit (Gehenna) into the same word "hell" not signify the deliberate tampering of Scriptures by translators? What if they had done that with other completely separate words with different meanings and translated them into the same word? For example, what if our Bible translators took the Greek words for "marriage, wine, spirit, and house" and translated them into the single noun sandal? Why would translators take a Greek noun (Gehenna) referring to a specific place and translate it into another noun, the same noun used for the grave and death and Tartarus? Is anyone as baffled by this as I am?

Why can we not see that the fire of Gehenna (hell) that was unquenchable and where the worm (maggot) thrived describes the valley of Hennom that Jesus alluded to when he said being lost would be like being tossed into that consuming garbage dump outside Jerusalem's walls (Isaiah 66:24; Mark 9:48)? Why cannot believers understand that "unquenchable" fire meant fire that would not go out until that which is consuming or "destroying" is gone? Why do so many of us perpetuate the notion that Gehenna is a symbol of "torture" rather than a place of punishment and destruction? How can we escape the idea that maggots consume the dead? How can serious Bible students make the Greek word for "maggot" mean some part of human beings that lives on and on eternally?

Why does the traditional teaching on hell refute the clear teaching of Peter that everything we know will be "burned up" and "destroyed" (2 Peter 3:10-12)? Why does Malachi refer to the evil ones as "stubble to be burned up" with nothing left if evil ones are to somehow be tortured unendingly by a loving God (Malachi 4:1)? If Paul clearly teaches that those who do not know God will suffer "everlasting destruction," why do traditionalists teach that it won't actually be destruction but will be never-ending, eternal "destroying" (2 Thessalonians 1:9)? Why can't intelligent people differentiate between "destruction" and "eternal life in a state of perpetual torture and destruction"? How is it possible for thinking and studious minds to refute the very teaching of the apostle Peter who writes of the "destruction of ungodly men" (2 Peter 3:7)?

Isn't it clear that even in his parabolic teachings Christ presents what represents the "evil unbelievers" (the chaff & tares) being burned up by unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:12; 13:40)? ***Is it not clear that fire is never used by God to depict continual torment and torture of so-called eternal souls?*** Why won't thinking minds admit that the "eternal fire" that burned up Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 7) is not now burning but only burned until that which it was destroying was ultimately consumed? Isn't this one of many examples where the word "eternal" does not mean "never ending"? And why on earth does the writer of Hebrews describe God as a "*consuming fire*" rather than a "torturing/tormenting fire" (Hebrews 12:29)? Why cannot clear thinking minds see that the story of the rich man and Lazarus cannot successfully be appealed to as grounds to teach eternal torment, for it is a parable with people still living on earth that need to be taught the gospel (Luke 16:19ff)? Hell isn't even mentioned in this parable.

Does not Paul teach that the "destiny" of the enemies of the cross is "destruction" (Philippians 3:19)? Why do some force "destruction" into "eternal life" in a state of torture? Have some of us been brainwashed so thoroughly that we miss these evident and clear truths? Is it possible to be taught something so long by those we trust that we accept it without personal study to see if it is true? Does not Peter clearly teach that undiscerning blasphemers will be destroyed just like the beasts that perish (2 Peter 2:12)? Why does the traditional position on hell (Gehenna), a word referring to an open and continually burning city garbage dump, continue to mislead and diametrically change the meaning of clear passages that teach God will ultimately consume his enemies? Is it not

because Satan, from the beginning in the garden of Eden, told Eve that she would "not surely die" and we have been perpetuating this doctrine of the devil ever since? Why are we so afraid to accept Scripture's clear teaching that eternal life is conditional (1 Corinthians 15:54) and "immortality" is not a given but rather a gift? Why are we eager to keep spewing the very false doctrine that goes against the very nature of God as one who is just and will do right? If God is going to torture the very ones he created in his image and loved so dearly that he allowed his only begotten son to die in their places and knew beforehand would not accept his grace, surely the Bible would teach such, would it not?

Is there one single Scripture that teaches humans are "immortal souls" unconditionally, souls that will live on forever and forever either in the blissfulness of heaven or the torturing torment of a Gehenna fire that will never go out and will not consume what is put into it? Isn't it strange that God would refer to the lake of fire as the "second death"? Why did he not know to call it the "eternal burning of those created in his image"? Isn't it because such false teaching cannot be found in all of Holy Writ?

In summation, isn't it strange indeed that most believers have taken a "real place" (Gehenna) referred to by Jesus himself as a metaphor of destruction and have changed it into another made up/fabricated "real place" (hell) where souls (spirits, living beings, whatever) will be tortured unendingly by a loving heavenly Father? If Gehenna is a metaphor of "hell" as it is traditionally taught, isn't it a poor one, for Gehenna (the Jerusalem city dump of Jesus' era) was a real place of destruction and consummation with no torment and no torture involved, while "hell" is a made up place of torment

and torture with no destruction at all? Is this twisted thinking the height of misguided thinking? By the way, the garbage dump in the Valley of Hinnom is no longer burning and consuming its refuse, is it?

Is Satan pleased with all of this? Surely it isn't wrong to ask; is it?

Hell, You Say?

The traditional concept of hell originated in the minds of pagan philosophers and has been assimilated into the church at large, along with purgatory, prayers to saints, and other like doctrines, via Roman Catholicism. The vestiges of Catholicism still exist within much of Protestantism and can be seen in the perpetuation of this false teaching as well as in our liturgies and many other practices. The false teaching that hell is a place where eternal souls are tormented and tortured forever and ever, unendingly, by a just God, was opposed by Protestant reformers such as Luther and Tyndale as well as Restoration leaders such as Moses Lard. Hell and other pagan teachings were introduced into our Bibles by scholars mistranslating four words some 57 times in the King James Version: *Hades, Sheol, Gehenna, Tartarus*. The mere "translation" of four different words into one single word alone should cause red flags to go up in discerning minds. No wonder we have such outlandish misconceptions regarding the state of the wicked and unbelieving dead after judgment.

Lest someone suppose I have a hidden agenda or wish to change the unchangeable, allow me to say here and now that I am a believer in heaven as well as hell. I just don't believe what has been falsely taught regarding hell all these centuries since the New Testament was penned. I am not saying those who have taught this and those who have believed it did so with evil intent. I can't possibly know that. I know as I believed this misguided view of hell much of my life, I certainly didn't entertain the thought with malice or evil intent. I simply trusted those who taught me and believed they must surely have known more about it than I did. Something Charles Hodge taught me years ago comes to mind and I have repeated it often. ***"We aren't compelled to believe what people say the Bible teaches, but we surely need to believe what the Bible actually teaches."***

Jesus warned against holding to the traditions of men (Mark 7:8). We are not compelled to believe what men say the Bible says regarding hell (Gehenna) or any other biblical subject, but only what the Bible actually teaches. Some of the catch phrases that we often hear when dealing with this matter are *surprisingly unbiblical*. The terms "eternal hell" and "endless punishment" and "immortal soul" cannot be found in Scripture. These are constructs of human minds. Jesus spoke of "eternal punishment" but he never hinted of continual eternal torture of souls that live on and on in some state of anguish and torment.

There is a great deal of difference between "punishing" someone and "torturing" someone. If we punished a child for disobedience we might spank him or take away some privileges or even ground him for days or weeks. Under the Old Law, children were stoned for disobeying their parents. They were never tortured, however. If we held fire to a child's hands who was caught stealing and kept the fire there until blisters were present, someone might suggest that we had stepped out of the realm of punishing into the realm of torture. We would immediately be arrested for child endangerment. Yet we have believed and perpetuate the notion that our God will do far worse with us—keep us alive just to burn and torture us unendingly with no remedial purpose in mind.

There are four words in our Bible translated into a single English word, "hell." These are: 1) *Sheol*, 2) *Hades*, 3) *Gehenna*, 4) *Tartarus* (found only in 2 Peter 2:4 in reference to the abode of "*the angels that sinned*"). Most scholars realize that the Hebrew "Sheol" and the Greek "Hades" refer to the grave or the abode of the dead. It is the word "Gehenna" that has us ensnared in a cloud of misunderstanding. Gehenna was the place outside Jerusalem that was the city dump. It was located in the valley of [the sons of] Hinnom and was continually burning up the trash, garbage, and even corpses of criminals and animals. It was a place of filth and consumption. The flames and smoke were continually belching up their destruction of the refuse tossed into it. Along with the flames, at the outer edges, were maggots that were ever gnawing at the carcasses, thus the expression from Mark 9:48 "*the worm that does not die.*" Someone along the way, someone with a vivid imagination, decided that the Greek word for worm somehow meant the soul of a human being. A maggot became a soul.

Jesus, in describing the future of those who were disobedient and wicked, chose to use the most horrifying of descriptions to paint a picture of the awfulness of it. When heaven is described in Scripture, or the Holy City, words are used that

convey preciousness to us: gold, pearl, living water. When speaking of the ugliness of being cast out from God's presence forever, the most frightening words to human ears and eyes are used to describe it: outer darkness, lake of fire and brimstone, bottomless pit, burning chaff, et al. What scares us the most? Being burnt. Being alone in total darkness. Falling. So our Lord chose words to convey the horror of being lost and cut off from God. I am grateful for this word imagery, for it helps scare the "hell" out of me. I want to avoid hell at all costs.

When Satan began his lying to us in the Garden, he began with a promise that flew in the face of what God had spoken. God said that if our original parents ate of the forbidden tree they would *"surely die."* Satan came along and altered the word of God by inserting a single word of his own. *"You will NOT surely die."* And in our traditional view of hell we have been parroting Satan's lie once again. We tell people the exact opposite of what God has said. God calls the state of the ungodly the *"second death."* But we presume to edit God and tell people they will not really die, but that they will live on in constant agony and torture. Jesus clearly taught us to *"not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can DESTROY BOTH SOUL AND BODY IN HELL"* (Matthew 10:28). Jesus uses the word "destroy." We correct him, as well as God and the Holy Spirit, and substitute the words "live on and on and on." Whom shall students of God's word believe? God's word even makes a distinction between the soul and the body and hints that we need to fear the God who can "destroy" both. He didn't say to "fear him who can torment and torture the soul and/or body." He didn't say to "fear him who can inflict pain to the soul and/or body unendingly without mercy."

Jesus teaches that God will destroy both soul and body in hell, but we mimic Satan and say, "Oh, no!" We have been teaching that God will keep us alive forever unconditionally and heat up the flames and darken the darkness and keep the pit open so that we will be tormented and tortured forever. There is not one Scripture that teaches such! Find it. It is a doctrine that found its origin in Paganism, Phariseism, and Catholicism and adopted by most of Protestantism, but not one taught by our Savior.

In a recent conversation with the esteemed Professor Emeritus Jimmy Allen, of Harding University, I was informed that he was "rethinking" and "restudying" his traditional understanding of hell. He shared with me more

than confidentiality will allow me to repeat at this time, but brother Allen sent me a copy of a paper by Moses E. Lard, printed in 1879 by the title "Do the Holy Scriptures Teach the Endlessness of Future Punishment?" Lard, in a magnificent word study on the Greek "aion" draws many of the conclusions I have outlined here. I am indebted to brother Allen and share the Lard lecture simply to point out that this understanding isn't new or something a few harebrained fanatics have thought up recently to stir controversy. No, this teaching that I am presenting goes back to the Bible itself. When someone says to me, "Goad, you have gone liberal," I am happy to respond with a smile, "No, brother. I haven't gone liberal, but I have gone biblical." The familiar we must view more closely.

Then how have we been duped all these years? Glad you asked. We have taken as literal, figurative expressions. And we have made figurative language into literal expressions. The fire that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah was said to be "eternal," but it is no longer burning. The *result* of the fire was eternal, not the burning itself. The fire of Gehenna, from which Jesus made his point of destruction, is no longer burning in Jerusalem, in spite of the fact that it was called everlasting (aion). The "*results*" are forever, not the consumption itself.

"Eternal" and "everlasting" do not always mean "never ending." For example, it was spoken of the Passover (Exodus 12:24), the Aaronic priesthood (Exodus 29:9), Caleb's inheritance (Joshua 14:9), Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 8:12,13), and Gehazi's leprosy (2 Kings 5:27), to name just a few, but these are all completed. Why do we understand the accommodation of words in some contexts but ignore them in others? The punishment of the wicked will be directly commensurate with their level of disobedience and administered without partiality by a just and merciful God, of this we may be sure. In Matthew 25:46, Jesus has the goats cast away in to "eternal punishment" not "*eternal punishing.*" Big difference! Solomon wrote, "*Will he not repay such person according to what he has done*" (Proverbs 24:12b). Peter wrote, "*It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them*" (2 Peter 2:21). God is the one who will punish the wicked and evildoer. He doesn't need our help.

Satan tells us to tell others they "*will not surely die.*" But consider what God has to say about those who are disobedient. "*The way of the wicked shall PERISH*"

(Psalm 1:6). *"God's fire will CONSUME the wicked"* (Psalm 21:9). David said of those who lacked understanding that they are *"like the beasts that PERISH"* (Psalm 49:20). David calls death the *"land of OBLIVION"* (Psalm 88:12). *"God will DESTROY them for their wickedness"* (Psalm 94:23). Solomon wrote, *"When the storm has SWEPT AWAY, the wicked are GONE"* (Proverbs 10:25) and *"...the lamp of the wicked is SNUFFED OUT"* (Proverbs 13:9; 24:20).

God is never pictured in Scripture as an eternal tormentor. He is not a God who "tortures" those he loves. That is not good news. But he has promised to punish and "destroy" those who are not in his grace. *"If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God"* (Hebrews 10:26,27). This familiar verse reminds us again to look more closely at what we think we understand. There are nuggets of truth hidden from us because of our preconceptions. This verse has been used to beat up people with concerning attendance at assemblies. We have practically ignored the details of what God will do with those who turn from him. God is not a torturer of his own creation, but rather *"our God is a CONSUMING fire"* (Hebrews 12:29).

Satan and the church perpetuate the idea that we will live on and on and on in spite of the truth that Christians "put on" immortality at the resurrection. Our immortality isn't like God's; it's conditional. Only God is immortal in the true sense of that word (1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16). Human are mortals. We haven't always been as God has. We are created beings. We will not always be, unless God so wills it. Consider the wise man's words: *"I also thought, 'As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the SAME PLACE; all come from the dust, and to DUST ALL RETURN. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth'"* (Ecclesiastes 3:18-21). Shall we edit Solomon while we are at it?

Satan told our ancestors they would not surely die. We continue to tell the ungodly that they will live on in some bizarre eternal state of excruciatingly painful dying process and that God will thusly torture them without end. Scripture teaches us *"this will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish* (not torture, scg)

*those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be **punished** with everlasting **destruction** (not everlasting destroying, scg) and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9). Satan, the Catholic church, and many of us continue to teach, "There will be no actual destruction. There will be no second death. There will only be never-ending horrendous torture and torment by our loving Father in heaven." Absurd!*

John the baptizer taught that Jesus would *"burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire"* (Matthew 3:12). Who is represented by the chaff? The wicked, of course. Peter makes it extremely clear, unless we are wearing prejudicial glasses and have closed minds, that *"by the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and **destruction** of ungodly men"* (2 Peter 3:7). It is not God's will that we perish. He desires to save us. *"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to **perish**, but everyone to come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9). Even the golden text of the Bible reminds us of our possible perishing if we do not obey the gospel of Christ. Jesus said, *"...should not **perish**"* (John 3:16). How much plainer can it be than in the words of Peter again when he writes that *"the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar, and the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be burned up. Since everything will be **destroyed** in this way, what kind of people ought you to be"* (2 Peter 3:10-12).

Hard-line traditionalists point out that eternal life for the godly will last forever. So, too, the consummation and destruction of the ungodly will last forever. But nowhere is it taught in Scripture that "destruction will not be destruction" but rather "continual destroying and torture and agony and pain without end." The Greek word *"aionios"* which is translated "eternal" refers to the end result of a process rather than the destroying process or agent itself. It means the unsaved perish, yes perish, and the result is forever. Jude 7 has Sodom destroyed by "eternal fire" yet we realize there is no fire at the site of Sodom presently. The "destruction" of the twin cities was eternal, not the "destroying." They are not now being destroyed, are they?

Isaiah wrote: *"And the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into brimstone, and the land thereof shall become*

burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night or day; the smoke thereof shall go up forever..." (Isaiah 34:9). In this text the prophet is discussing the DESTRUCTION of Edom. Edom is now DESTROYED. No smoke ascends at that particular locale today. Why? We know why. Because the "result" of the smoke going up is forever, not the smoke and burning itself.

Jeremiah speaks of Judah's coming destruction. *"Then shall I kindle a fire in the gates thereof, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched"* (Jeremiah 17:27). If one visits Jerusalem today, they do not find a fire that is still burning (unless we spiritualize this text to suggest the continual conflict between those semitic cousins who are still throwing rocks at each other after all these centuries). ***Unquenchable fire simply means fire that will not be put out until that which it is destroying is utterly consumed.***

Does God teach in his word that evil people will be punished? Yes. Does the Bible tell us of those who have lived ungodly lives being held accountable for their disobedience and willful sin? Of course. And Scripture even hints of degrees of reward and punishment. We trust that God will punish in exact correctness and fairness those who are not among the redeemed. Will not the God of all heaven and earth do right by his creation? He will reward those who are found in his marvelous grace just as his holy and divine will decides. And I realize that these truths will mess up a lot of sermon outlines. So be it. I threw my old erroneous sermons on hell in the fire. They were ***consumed***. Good riddance.

Can any caring person think of a scenario where it would be okay to hold a blowtorch to the eyes of another person (say a Saddam Hussien, Adolf Hitler, Richard Speck, Jeffrey Dahmer, Nero, Stalin, Osama Bin Laden) for as long as strength allowed? Bin Laden was mercifully killed rather than tortured. We shudder at the thought of torture. Certainly this would be looked upon as a heinous and barbaric act. Yet we paint a picture of God who will do far worse than that to billions and billions of individuals and never stop doing it.

When we sit across the table from some poor soul who has just been taught of Jesus' redeeming love and now knows how to receive God's forgiveness, is it good news to tell him, when he asks, and he often does, where his beloved grandmother will be, or his child, or his wife who has passed on? "Yes, John, it doesn't sound like the God I have been describing to you, does it?"

But, believe me, it is part of the good news of Christ. Your grandmother and everyone in your family who has not done what I've told you to do will burn forever and ever in a fire that will never go out." Readers, this is simply incredible. It is a Satanic distortion of clear truth and an unnecessary stumbling block put in the paths of the very ones we attempt to convert. How cunning the devil still is. And we are his pawns when we teach such ungodliness. Someone suggests that we can't back off scaring people with hell fire or they will not obey the gospel. Hmmm. Is the world rushing to obey the gospel of Christ with the traditional view still ensconced? Hardly.

It's difficult to accept new truth, especially when we have presumed to pretty well know it all the first time we figured things out for ourselves or borrowed our belief systems from our instructors. It is even harder to admit that we have been wrong about matters we must admit we have not thoroughly studied and worked out for ourselves. This truth did not come easily to me. I swallowed unquestionably what was taught to me by those whom I thought loved me. They did love me. They only taught what they had been taught. We presume often, don't we, that we are above being fooled. But are we?

What shall we do with this newfound knowledge? Shall we hide with it in a closet like I did for years? Shall we fear repercussions from those in seats of authority? Yes. For a while some of us will do this. But eventually we shall have to deal with the reality that our Holy Father in heaven is not some maniacal torturer of his own precious creation. What good news this is! If I am mistaken about this, you would be my friend to show me how wrong I may be. I don't presume to have a monopoly on truth. I am open to learn new truth when it appears to me. May God bless you in the consideration of this material. And to God be the glory for his marvelous grace extended to us through Christ Jesus.