

THE SCRIPTURAL TRUTH ABOUT HELL

“Wherefore the Lord said... their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men.” — Isaiah 29:13

Today there is a mounting challenge to believing in the traditional doctrine of a literal fiery hell. In fact, before his death, Pope Francis comforted a young boy who was fearful that his atheist father would not be allowed into heaven. Francis assured the boy that, because his father baptized his children, he would surely go to heaven. By implication, Francis promised the child that his father would not go to what his church doctrine taught was a place for unbelievers — fiery torment. Even the well respected Billy Graham once stated: *“When it comes to a literal fire, I don’t preach it because I’m not sure about it.”* (Interview by Richard Ostling, *Time Magazine*, 11/93) Clark Pinnock, former Professor of McMaster Divinity College asserted that *“The wicked do not experience eternal conscious punishment, but rather cease to exist.”* *Christianity Today*, 12/92

Yes, many credible Christian leaders are made uncomfortable by the common belief that billions of the unsaved will agonize eternally in unquenchable flames. Where there is honest doubt, Christians need to be armed with the facts of Scripture as to the correct interpretation of the word *hell* and what it really means. Indeed, all interpretation of Scripture must logically harmonize with the truth that *“God IS Love.”* 1John 4:8

FEAR — A CONSEQUENCE OF BELIEVING IN HELLFIRE

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment.” (1 John 4:18) Our loving God does not desire His human creation to be obedient simply out of a fearful dread of Him. Genuine love cannot coexist with fear and torment. There is fear associated with the doctrine of hellfire, and love could not permit an eternity of torture. Most of mankind cannot understand why God has permitted the evil of this present life, let alone an eternity of flames scorching raw flesh! Could any of us take the hand of

our worst enemy and place it on a hot burner? Our instincts of love would not permit such an inhumane act. Keep in mind that within recent history, we have learned of those who were burned alive by Islamic extremists. We called these men sadistic and demonic terrorists. Yet, those who

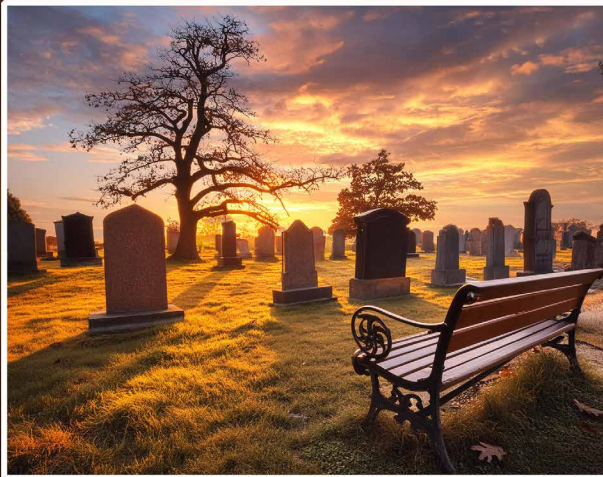
claim God burns people alive are accusing Him of doing the same thing, only worse, because their interpretation of hell is a place where people burn for eternity. Does this harmonize with Jeremiah’s words that God’s *compassions fail not?* Lamentations 3:22-23

If man was created in God’s image and likeness, has he not inherited God’s trait of compassion? Would a God who tells us to love our enemies, create in us a desire to burn them forever? Consider the

lesson of the Hebrews who built altars to the false god Molech and sacrificed their children on the fire. God cried out, *“...I commanded them not, neither came it into my mind, that they should do this abomination...”* (Jeremiah 32:35) If God’s love could not conceive of such cruelty, how could He *create* a literal burning hell? If we are unsure of the doctrine of hell, it behooves us to seek to know God, His character and His plans that we might understand Him and glorify Him. The Apostle Paul urged us to *“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”* (2 Timothy 2:15) Thus, to bring glory to God and His character, we must reason on the true meaning of His words in order to rightly and correctly interpret His message.

GOD IS BOTH JUST AND LOVING

God’s foundational nature is a balance of justice, wisdom and love. In His wisdom, God created a plan which would permit humanity to experience and learn from the *exceeding sinfulness of sin*, while at the same time, would provide a means of salvation. God is indeed both *“just,*



and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.” (Romans 3:26) “God...will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all to be testified in due time.” (1 Timothy 2:4-6) If all are promised this opportunity *in due time*, the concept of a fiery hell awaiting the vast majority of humanity is certainly an *unjust* interpretation of Scripture.

Let us reason on God’s justice. When God created Adam, He provided for every need with the condition that Adam would remain obedient: “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” (Genesis 2:16-17) Notice that the just *penalty* for disobedience was *death*, not eternal torment. Ezekiel confirms this: “...the soul that sinneth, it shall die.” (Ezekiel 18:4) Paul also confirms that “the wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23) Yes, God sentenced Adam to *death* for the sin of disobedience — God did not mention anything about burning sinners for eternity— nothing of the kind is even hinted at in the original penalty. God said to Adam: “...return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken:

for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” (Genesis 3:19) Therefore, it is *death* and all that accompanies this *penalty* for disobedience from which mankind will be saved.

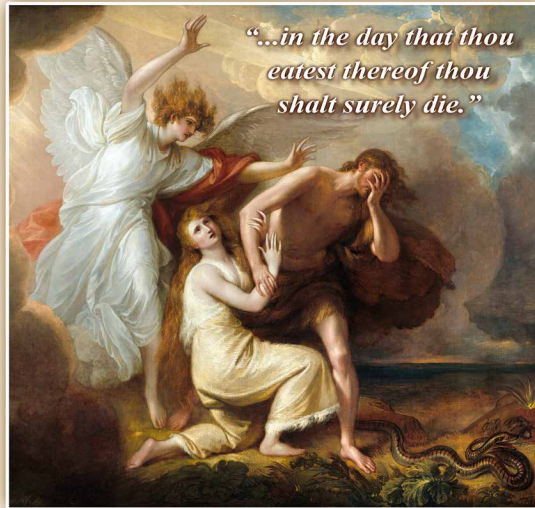
God’s justice is absolute: *a life for a life*. (Deuteronomy 19:21) For this cause, Christ came into the world to pay the penalty for Adam’s sin: “For if by one man’s offence death [not eternal torment] reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:17, 18) Thus, God’s *justice* was *balanced* by His *compassion*. His universal laws of justice and love require that *all* will be brought back from their graves for an opportunity to learn how to fully obey Him and to reform. Isaiah proclaimed: “...when Thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.” Isaiah 26:9

ORIGINS OF A FIERY HELL

The idea of a fiery hell extends at least as far back as the 6th Century B.C. from the ancient pagan teachings of the Persian prophet Zoroaster. He taught that a “Lord of Lies” lived in the dark reaches under the earth recording the deeds of men as debits and credits. And, even before this pagan religion of Zoroaster, ancient Egyptian, Greek and far eastern pagan religions all taught various versions of many *hells* to which the soul must continuously migrate in misery.

As this paganism mingled with Christianity under the

influence of Constantine in the 4th Century A.D., these *pagan concepts* attached themselves to the highly symbolic statements by Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus used word pictures such as wheat, fish, sheep, weddings, fig trees, vineyards and leaven to illustrate spiritual lessons. He used the word *gehenna* to illustrate *complete destruction*. Gehenna was a valley that lay just outside the city of Jerusalem, serving as a garbage pit — its fires were kept continually burning to completely consume all things deposited there, brimstone being added to assist combustion and insure *complete destruction*. No living thing was ever permitted to be cast into gehenna, for God’s Law to the Jews prevented torture of any kind to any creature.



Jesus never intended, therefore, to give *literal* meaning to the word *gehenna*. Regrettably, the Dark Age church noted that assigning a literal meaning to Jesus’ words, the **fear of hellfire** was a strong incentive to keep people in the pews and to create new converts. In fact, the fear of eternal torment has been used to terrify Christians for nearly 1,700 years. History records that every device of persecution, tyranny and torture in the name of God and religion has flourished to frighten the uneducated church goer into believing. Harold

O.J. Brown, former theology professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, affirmed the effectiveness of the fear of hellfire: “...*annihilationism* [non-existence as a penalty for sin] *takes some of the punch out of Gospel preaching*. To tell the unrepentant that the worst fate that could befall them is extinction makes continuing in sin seem less risky.” Is fear harmonious with an honest-hearted devotion to God? Is God honored by such coercion to believe? This Dark Age doctrine has certainly proven what God said: “*Their fear toward me is taught by the precepts of men....*” Isaiah 29:13

THE GREEK & HEBREW MEANING OF THE WORD HELL

An exhaustive word search reveals the true meaning of the word *hell*. Briefly, in every case throughout the Old Testament, the word is translated from the Hebrew word *sheol* which means *grave*. Both good and bad persons went to *sheol*, but biased translators assigned the English interpretive word *hell* when referring to a bad person, but the same translators chose the words *grave* or *pit* as the final resting place for good people. For example, Job prayed to go to *sheol* (*hell/the grave*) to hide from his pain. Certainly, Job would not pray to go into eternal flames to escape his pain. When speaking of Lucifer, Isaiah declared of Satan that he “*shalt be brought down to hell* (*sheol/the grave*).” This clearly shows the bias of these translators. The Hebrew word *sheol*, being the same in both cases, there is no reason

why the same word, *grave*, should not be used consistently. Indeed, *sheol* does not mean torment, but quite the reverse — instead of a place of blazing fire, it is described in the context as a place or condition of silence — absence of life. See Job 10:19-22 and Psalms 88:11, 12. “*There is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, in the grave [sheol] whither thou goest.*” Ecclesiastes 9:10

In the New Testament, the word *hell* is translated from three different Greek words: 1) *hades* meaning *grave*; 2) *tartaroo*, a place where the fallen angels were sent *between heaven and earth*; and 3) *gehenna*, the *Valley of Hinnom* outside of Jerusalem, used as a *garbage dump*. Be it noted that in every case where the concept of *hellfire* is used, the context is highly symbolic.

1) The New Testament Greek word *hades* corresponds exactly to the Hebrew word *sheol* — *grave*, as evidenced in Acts 2:27: “*Thou wilt not leave my soul in hades.*” This is found in Psalm 16:10: “*Thou wilt not leave my soul in sheol [the grave].*” In 1 Corinthians 15:54, 55, “*Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave [hades], where is thy victory?*” This text is in reference to Isaiah 25:8, “*He will swallow up death in victory*” and to Hosea 13:14, “*O death, I will be thy plagues; O sheol [grave], I will be thy destruction.*” And again, even though *hades* is defined in these Scriptures as the *grave*, biased translators still rendered the same word *hades* in the New Testament as *hell* in Luke 10:15: “*And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted to heaven, shalt be thrust down to hell [hades/the grave].*” Again, since the Greek word *hades* is the same in both cases, there is no reason why the word *grave* should not be used consistently.

2) The Greek word *tartaroo* occurs but once in the Scriptures and has been translated *hell*: “*God spared not the angels who sinned, but cast [them] down to hell [tartaroo], and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment.*” (2 Peter 2:4) The fallen angels (demons) who sinned in Noah’s day were condemned and cast out of heaven — God’s holy dominion. They were not sent to a fiery underworld, but were no longer permitted to mingle directly with humanity nor with God’s holy angels. They were confined to what the Bible symbolically terms “*chains of darkness*” in earth’s atmosphere — a prison condition awaiting a final judgment. See Jude 1:6 and Genesis 6:1-8. Before God’s Kingdom is fully established, any unrepentant demons will be *destroyed* forever.

3) As pointed out, *gehenna*, the picture of utter destruction, is the final penalty upon all the disobedient, who, after accepting redemption through Christ and brought to the full knowledge of the truth, shall choose a course of opposition

to God and righteousness. These incorrigible few “*will be destroyed from among the people.*” (Acts 3:23) Thank God that the majority of the world will choose life everlasting when they finally see, for the first time, with eyes unhindered by false doctrines, the beautiful harmony of the Scriptures.

It is interesting to note here that originally, the old English word *hell* simply meant to conceal, to hide, to cover. In old English literature, records may be found of the *helling* of potatoes — putting potatoes into pits; and of the *helling* of a house — covering it with thatch. The word *hell* was therefore properly used if the translators were using the word *hell* as the hidden condition of the dead in their graves. However, because of the blending of truth with pagan error, the word *hell* became associated with Zoroaster’s underworld of torment, and thus, the word *hell* was redefined as a punishment more terrifying than death, which is the true punishment for sin — the *grave*.



The Loving Conclusion

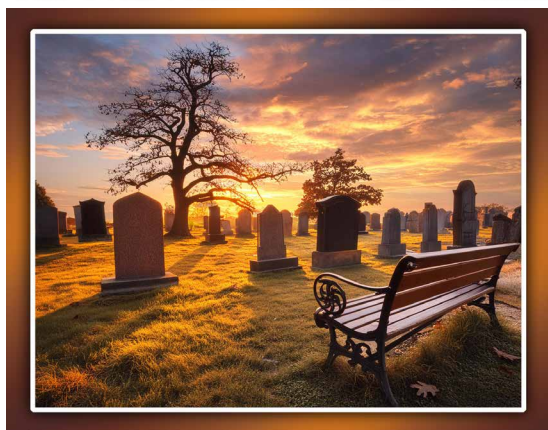
A literal *fiery hell* is the device of Satan and his influence upon mankind to slander God’s just and loving character and to prevent the world from truly knowing Him. Remember, Jesus gave Satan the name *the father of lies*. (John 8:44) But we can rest confident in God’s

Word that *the wrath of man [influenced by Satan] shall praise God* when the world discovers that God truly IS love and not the monster Satan would have us believe. Psalm 76:10; 1 John 4:8

Yes, God’s compassions are far more generous than the popular, false interpretations of Scripture. Soon, God’s plans and purposes will reveal to all humanity His mighty justice, wisdom, love and power. Through the gift of His Son, He has provided that the sin of man will soon “*...be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord... Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.... him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.*” (Acts 3:19-23) Notice the word *destroyed*, *not tormented* — it would be as if the individual had never been born. Our merciful Father would never cause the endless suffering of those who reject His offer of salvation through Christ. Ask yourself, what would be God’s purpose in tormenting people forever?

How wonderful that we can “*trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.*” (1 Timothy 4:10) Those who are not in an environment or mental condition to believe now will be granted an opportunity to learn in God’s Kingdom to come, where His will shall be done on earth as it is now being done in heaven. Matthew 6:10

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