

“Thus Saith the LORD”

***“Prove all things;
hold fast that
which is good.”***

***—I Thessalonians
5:21***

IN LAST MONTH’S ISSUE

of *The Dawn* we considered, in Part 1 of our examination of this subject, the methods whereby we may learn to properly interpret the Scriptures, in order to seek clear and harmonious assurance concerning the truthfulness of the doctrines which we believe. Using these methods, we then investigated the long-held teaching of the trinity. In so doing, we found that it does not meet the criteria of a “Thus saith the LORD” because of errors in the translation of certain Scriptures—errors that are well documented by Bible scholars and commentators. We also noted that the trinity does not harmonize with other important doctrines of the Bible, such as the ransom, and other teachings which show the true nature of the “oneness” between God, his Son Christ Jesus, and the consecrated followers of Christ, the church.

In Part 2 of our review of this topic, we will look at two additional teachings of Christianity—eternal

torment and “the day of salvation”—in order to determine their veracity, by use of the same methods outlined last month. As sincere students of the Bible, it should always be our desire to do as the noble Bereans, who “received the word with all readiness of mind,” and most notably, “searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” (Acts 17:11) Only by so doing can we follow the words of Paul found in our opening text—“prove all things.”

DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ETERNAL TORMENT?

To even the staunchest supporter of this teaching, the idea that a being could be literally tormented and tortured for all eternity is beyond comprehension and unfathomably cruel. Furthermore, to attribute the source of such an idea to the God of the universe should be nothing less than revolting and inconceivable. However, in spite of the inherent repulsiveness of this doctrine, it is claimed that numerous Scriptures support it. Let us quote some of the verses from the Bible upon which this teaching is based.

“He shall 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 ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night.” (Rev. 14:10,11) “Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.” (Matt. 25:41) “The devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, . . . and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” (Rev. 20:10) “Wherefore if

thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.”—Matt. 18:8,9

These appear to be perfectly good Scriptures, and a clear “Thus saith the LORD!” They are the words of Jesus during his earthly ministry and later, as the glorified Lord, part of his message given by vision to John the Revelator. These verses seem to teach eternal torment, but do they? Is that what God is truly saying through the mouthpiece of his beloved Son, the one who suffered and died, “the just for the unjust?”—I Pet. 3:18

EXAMINING THIS TEACHING

The first Scripture quoted above which is often used to prove the doctrine of eternal torment is Revelation 14:10,11. Paraphrasing, it is believed by many that the unfaithful person herein spoken of will be tormented with literal fire and brimstone, and this will be done in the presence of holy angels and the Lamb, Christ Jesus. In addition, the smoke of this fire will rise up to heaven eternally, and those suffering this fate will be tormented day and night forever.

The very first question we must answer is this: Does this description of “eternal torment” harmonize with the stated character of God? We answer: no, not even remotely so, as we will confirm according to the Bible. Thus, we additionally answer that there

must be another way of interpreting this Scripture than as a literal statement of fact. First, however, let us observe that the Bible teaches that love is the most fundamental feature of God's character—the essence of his very being.

We cite one powerful example: “God is love. . . . There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment.” (I John 4:8,18) The inseparableness between God and love is taught throughout both the Old and New Testaments. However, in these words of John, let us especially note in detail what is being said. It is “fear,” not God, that causes torment, the apostle says, and “perfect love,” the source of which is God, “casteth out fear.” John is in effect telling us that, because “God is love,” he is incapable of tormenting his creatures. It is entirely foreign to his character, contrary to his thoughts, and an abomination to him. Indeed, as church history corroborates, just the opposite has been the case—for centuries it has been the “fear” of eternal fire and brimstone which has caused “torment” in the hearts of millions of people, both good and evil. Such fear and torment have never been sanctioned by God!

God's view of this false teaching is confirmed by his words to Israel. He explicitly commanded them not to follow the methods which the heathen nations around them practiced in the worship of their gods. “Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, . . . for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire.” (Deut. 12:30,31) We note here that the practice of sacrificing humans by fire

was specifically forbidden under God's law to Israel. It was an "abomination to the LORD, which he hateth!"

Israel did not obey God's command, and his witness against them is later recorded by the prophet: "They have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind." (Jer. 19:5) A second witness against Israel is given several chapters later, in which God said: "They built the high places of Baal, . . . to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire unto Molech, which I commanded them not, neither came it into my mind, that they should do this abomination." (chap. 32:35) These detestable and loathsome heathen practices came straight from the mind of Satan, not from God. His character of love would never have fashioned such a plan.

GOD'S ATTRIBUTE OF JUSTICE

We are told in the Scriptures that another unchangeable element of God's character is justice. "Thy throne rests on equity and justice." (Ps. 89:14, *James Moffatt Translation*) Does eternal torment harmonize with God's character attribute of justice? Among the vast majority of fallen mankind, the most horrendous of crimes are, at the most, punishable by death, not torture and torment. Even in cases where the twisted minds of some, past and present, have resorted to brutal torture of those deemed "guilty" of some heinous evil, the agony suffered has most often been brief, with unconsciousness quickly following, then death, ending the torture. Is it reasonable to suppose that the

God of love, equity, and justice, would resort to practices far beyond what even the most perverted minds of fallen mankind have been capable of? We answer—certainly not!

God's plan for the obliteration of all wickedness and wicked ones forever from the heavens and the earth is by means of what the Bible calls "second death." (Rev. 20:10,14) God will certainly not keep any of the wicked alive in torment after his permission of evil has come to an end. On the contrary, we are told plainly that the wicked "shall be punished with everlasting destruction." (II Thess. 1:9) Eternal torment is completely out of harmony with the attributes of God. Second death—eternal destruction—on the other hand, is in full accord with his character.

The penalty for sin was announced by God even before Adam sinned. It was simply to be death, oblivion, the absence of life—"Thou shalt surely die," God said. (Gen. 2:17) Would it be just for God to declare the penalty as death, and then after the sin had been committed to change his mind and condemn the sinner to an eternity of torment? Such an action would be most unjust, and is not acceptable even in the courts of law which fallen man has set up. Paul states the matter very simply: "The wages of sin is death"—not eternal fire, brimstone, or torture.—Rom. 6:23

NOT IN HARMONY WITH GOD'S PLAN

In addition to failing the test of God's character qualities, the eternal torment teaching does not harmonize with the Bible's testimony concerning God's plan, centered in the doctrine of the ransom.

If the sentence upon Adam was eternal torment, and Jesus took Adam's place, Jesus must certainly endure torment forever in order to be a substitute for Adam. We know that this is false, because Jesus was raised from death on the third day to a place of honor next to the Father himself. Adam's sentence, clearly stated before his fall, and carried out at the end of 930 years upon this earth, was death. Jesus died to pay that penalty—a perfect life given, for a perfect life forfeited—as the ransom price.—I Tim. 2:5,6; Heb. 2:9; Rom. 5:18; I Cor. 15:45

In addition to the ransom, the plan of God is also stated in the Scriptures to provide the opportunity for restoration of all mankind to perfection and harmony with God here upon earth. These “times of restitution of all things,” Peter says, God has “spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.” (Acts 3:21) The tormenting of a large segment of humanity eternally is incompatible with Peter's words concerning God's plan for the restoration of the earth, and all who have ever lived upon it.

LITERAL OR SYMBOLIC?

Turning again to the words quoted earlier from Revelation 14:10,11, we ask a further question in order to help determine what these verses truly teach: Is this passage in Revelation literal or symbolic in its meaning? We answer that it is highly symbolic. Revelation is a book of symbols. As we read in the first verse of chapter 1, “things which must shortly come to pass” were “signified” unto John—that is, they were shown to him “by signs.” (*Rotherham Emphasized Bible*) Throughout this

symbolic book, information was imparted to John through signs and symbols.

The 14th chapter of Revelation, like the entire book, is replete with symbols. In verses 1-4, there is a “Lamb,” a symbol of Christ, standing on “mount Sion,” representing his heavenly kingdom. There is “great thunder,” a symbol of controversy, upheaval and trouble. “Harpers” play and sing a “new song,” harmoniously declaring the glad tidings of restitution. There is a “throne,” a symbol of authority and rulership. Then there are “beasts,” “elders” and “virgins,” all having symbolic significance.

In the 8th verse we are told that “Babylon is fallen,” which was once a “great city.” This too, is symbolic. Babylon means “confusion,” and is a representation of the confusing creeds of the false church system established by Satan after the apostles died. These words refer to the time when these systems would “fall” from the power and domination they once had over mankind. The “beast and his image,” mentioned in verse 9, also represent aspects of this great Babylon system which have impoverished society and filled the earth with false doctrines.

With this background, we are able to deal with the true meaning of the Scriptures under consideration. In verses 9 and 10, an angel, or messenger, says: “If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation.”

Here we see several more symbols brought to our attention. First is the “mark,” or identification

of those in harmony or sympathy with the beast or his image. The fact that the mark is in the “forehead”—influencing their thinking—and in the “hand”—indicating their actions or works—is significant. The mark on the “forehead” implies a mental assent, even if only passive; the mark in the “hand” implies an active cooperation. These, God’s messenger says, will drink the “wine of the wrath of God,” out of the “cup of his indignation.” This indicates that those who endeavor to perpetuate these systems will feel the manifestation of God’s displeasure. They also will recognize eventually his denouncement of them, being compelled to drink a bitter dose as they see them falling apart, even as they are beginning to do in our day.

As we think upon the foregoing list of the many symbols contained in Revelation 14:1-10, any attempt to apply them literally would be most confusing, and prevent us from getting the lesson the Lord wishes to give. Jesus is not a literal lamb; a literal beast is not worshipped; and it does not have a literal image. Literal marks are not made on literal foreheads or hands. These are all symbols, which, when correctly interpreted, represent profound truths telling of important events of the past, present, and soon to come.

Now we come to the portion of Revelation 14:10,11, which states that those who worship the beast and his image shall drink of the wine of God’s wrath from the cup of his indignation—clearly a statement filled with symbolic terms. From this point on, however, many insist that the symbolisms cease, and that the remainder of the text suddenly demands literal interpretation—namely, that all those who

worship this symbolic beast or its image will be literally tormented with fire and brimstone, and the smoke of their torment will ascend up to heaven forever. It is further interpreted that this literal punishment applies to all the wicked of the earth, even though the verse specifically addresses only those who worship the beast and his image.

To further illustrate the difficulty of interpreting literally this portion of the text, we note that it says the torments take place “in the presence of the Lamb.” If the torment with fire and brimstone is literal, so must the lamb be a literal animal. By what authority can we say that one is literal and the other is symbolic, since they are spoken of in the same sentence? If one is literal, so must be the other. In this case, it is evident that, just as the beast and other terms can be logically understood only as symbols, the torment by fire and brimstone is likewise symbolic.

ANOTHER TEXT EXAMINED

As previously quoted, another verse cited as a proof of the reality of eternal torment is Matthew 25:41, in which Jesus speaks of some going into “everlasting fire.” This verse is part of Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats—symbolic terms once again—and describes their respective judgment at the end of Christ’s earthly kingdom. (vss. 31-46) Let us first note that no literal fire burns continuously, preserving alive that which is in its midst. By way of example, a fire will consume a piece of wood, and then go out. The piece of wood is forever destroyed. It is not preserved to continually burn. Thus, in this text, fire is appropriately used as a

symbol of destruction. “Everlasting fire” is a symbol of everlasting destruction—the second death—from which there will be no resurrection.—Rev. 21:8

We note, too, that in this case the fire was “prepared for the devil and his angels.” The Scriptures inform us as to exactly what is going to happen to the devil. We are told that through Jesus’ death as man’s Savior and Redeemer, he will be enabled, at the proper time in God’s plan, to “destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.” (Heb. 2:14) Here we have confirmation of the fact that fire is symbolic of utter destruction, and Satan’s end will be everlasting oblivion—he will exist no more. What a glorious prospect this is!

OTHER SYMBOLS

The third text cited earlier is Revelation 20:10, in which John sees in vision the devil “cast into the lake of fire and brimstone,” to be tormented forever. We again suggest that the only reasonable interpretation of this verse is a symbolic one. Brimstone, or sulphur, is one of the most destructive chemical elements known. Together with fire, it symbolizes utter destruction. Likewise, a “lake” containing no water, but only fire and brimstone, can hardly be taken literally. The lake spoken of in this verse symbolizes the fact that the eventual destruction of Satan will be known and understood by all mankind.

Similarly, the torment “day and night for ever and ever” is symbolic. The root word in the Greek from which “torment” is translated means “a touchstone.” (*Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*) The destruction of Satan, the devil, will be an everlasting “touchstone” for

mankind. They will forever remember the sin, suffering, and death which he brought upon all people, and his resulting demise into everlasting ignominy and disrepute. Isaiah prophesies of the time when mankind will figuratively point their fingers at Satan—once called Lucifer—in abhorrence for all he inflicted upon mankind through his deceptive, deceitful actions, beginning with Adam and Eve, down to the end of this present evil world. (Isa. 14:12-17) Surely, this will be an eternal touchstone for mankind, and they will never again have any desires nor sympathies toward evil.

Finally, we will examine the verses cited earlier from Matthew 18:8,9. These are the words of Jesus. He speaks of our cutting off our hand or foot, or plucking out our eye, if these parts of our body are offensive. He further states that it would be better to go through life with only one hand, foot, or eye, than to have two of them, only to be eventually cast into everlasting fire. Did Jesus advocate self-mutilation? Certainly not—on the contrary he healed men, and restored their use of hands and feet and eyes. We must conclude again that symbolic idioms have been employed here to teach a lesson. The Scripture simply and powerfully teaches that it is better for a Christian to cut off and eliminate from his life, things as dear to him as symbolized by a hand, a foot, or an eye, if they would prevent him from pleasing God. Such elimination of treasured desires or possessions would be far better than to fail of God's calling, or to lose eternal existence in the second death.

As we have seen in our examination of this subject, everlasting fire means everlasting destruction.

We have determined what God desires that we understand from his Word, and what constitutes a complete “Thus saith the LORD.” These interpretations fully satisfy us. They square with the ransom, and are in full accordance with God’s plan for man’s salvation. They harmonize with God’s attributes of Justice and Love, and cause us to praise and worship him—not out of fear—but because we understand his righteous and equitable character.

WILL SALVATION BE AVAILABLE IN THE FUTURE?

We will now consider the teaching believed by a majority of professed Christians that there is no future opportunity for salvation—that it is limited to this life only. One Scripture used to support this thought is the statement from Paul: “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” (II Cor. 6:2) To believe that this Scripture says that now is the only acceptable time for salvation is adding a thought which Paul did not include in the verse. Beyond this, such a concept is contrary to God’s prime attribute of love. Billions have lived and died without ever having heard of the name of Jesus Christ, in whom alone, the Bible says, is found salvation. Peter, speaking of Jesus, said, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”—Acts 4:12

Millions also have been unable by reason of mental illness or instability, or lack of judgment, to understand the message of salvation. Multitudes have been blinded by Satan, the prince of this world, to such an extent that they cannot discern truth from error. All these human lives are not expendable in

the eyes of God. Paul stated that it is God's will—his desire—for “all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.” (I Tim. 2:4) When God wills something, he has the power and the wisdom to make it happen.

The idea that the present life is the only day of salvation—which is not what the verse under consideration says—is out of harmony with the doctrine of the ransom. Since Christ died a “ransom for all,” all must have an opportunity for life. (I Tim. 2:6) That all must be saved from Adamic death is the foundation of the ransom doctrine. This is God's provision, but in this life, only a relative few have had the blessing of receiving a full, free opportunity for salvation.

The belief that this life provides the only chance for salvation is not in accordance with another important feature of God's plan. A future opportunity is plainly taught by Acts 3:21, which tells of “the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.” Hence, the interpretation that salvation is available only before death cannot be correct, because it denies the testimony of all God's holy prophets.

UNDERSTANDING THE SCRIPTURE

What, then, is meant in II Corinthians 6:2 by the words “the accepted time” and “the day of salvation?” Paul here is quoting from Isaiah, one of God's “holy prophets.” In Isaiah's prophecy, the words “an acceptable time” and “a day of salvation” are used. (Isa. 49:8) The indefinite articles “an” and “a” give an entirely different sense to the passage

than the definite article "the," which some translators have erroneously used in Paul's quote from Isaiah. This small detail makes all the difference in the understanding of this verse. There is "a day" of salvation now, and "a day" of salvation to come. Isaiah's prophecy, of which Paul only quotes a small portion, confirms this understanding. Referring again to Isaiah 49:8, the prophet states that those who are faithful during "an" acceptable time and in "a" day of salvation, will then be used to bless mankind by means of a "covenant of the people," and to "establish the earth," and reclaim its "desolate heritages." Such language would not make sense if there was to be only one opportunity for salvation.

These two days of salvation are contrasted by two Scriptures. Matthew 7:14 reads: "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." These faithful few, Paul says, "by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life." (Rom. 2:7) This is a difficult and restricted salvation, with the correspondingly high reward being the divine nature.—II Pet. 1:4

Isaiah 35:8 tells of the second "day" of salvation, which will be offered to all the remainder of mankind during the Messianic kingdom. A "highway," not a narrow way of sacrifice, "shall be there," Isaiah says. "It shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein." This is the way to human perfection and eternal life on earth, promised to all the willing and obedient in the kingdom "day of salvation."

What a wonderful plan God has designed! It is not the gloomy prospect of the vast majority of mankind unsaved and eternally condemned. Rather, it is the delightful vision of each individual being saved from death, and then given an opportunity, under ideal conditions, to attain human perfection and everlasting life here upon earth. This truly harmonizes with God's character. It is in accordance with his plan, and squares with the doctrine of the ransom.

SUMMARY

In this two-part article, we have presented only three of the many teachings believed by many which lack a properly based "Thus saith the LORD!" To provide our readers with a more detailed examination of these doctrines, The Dawn is pleased to offer, free of charge or obligation, copies of the booklets: *"Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;"* *"The Truth About Hell;"* and *"The Day of Judgment."* Simply contact us by phone, email, or in writing, using the information near the bottom of the inside back cover of this issue, and we will be happy to send you these valuable study aids.

Let us keep God's glorious plan of salvation always fresh and vital in our minds and hearts. By doing so, we will come to know his arrangements and purposes thoroughly, and any wrong interpretation of Scripture will instantly alert us. We will recognize it to be false, because it is not in harmony with what the Bible, in its entirety, has taught us. Only by thus "rightly dividing the word of truth," can we have a proper "Thus saith the Lord" for what we believe.—II Tim. 2:15 ■