

Death the Penalty—Not Torment

***“The Lord said,
Forasmuch as this
people draw near
me with their
mouth, and with
their lips do
honour me, but
have removed their
heart far from me,
and their fear
toward me is
taught by the
precept of men.”
—Isaiah 29:13***

ONE OF THE WIDESPREAD blights upon the religious thinking of the world is fear. Fear darkens the mind and hinders one from attaining a knowledge of the true God of love revealed to us in the Bible. Almost universally fear is employed by the proponents of religion as a means of making converts and as a motive for belief and righteous living. Our opening text emphasizes that this is wrong, that fear

toward God is induced by the precepts of men, and by those who, in their hearts, come far short of knowing the true God of the Bible, and of worshiping him in spirit and in truth.

One of the traditions of men which has contributed greatly to this unholy fear in the professed

Christian world is the false teaching that the divine penalty for sin is eternal torment. This tradition teaches that those who die without accepting Christ are doomed to this fate, where they will have to suffer throughout the endless ages of eternity. Thinking minds revolt at the very thought of this teaching, yet it is still believed by millions, and they insist that it is taught in the Bible. People who themselves are kind, sympathetic and forgiving, and who would give their lives to prevent their own children from being tortured, regardless of how wayward they might be, do not hesitate to teach that the God of all mercy and love will consign to torment billions of his creatures forever in the most excruciating fashion.

Most supporters of the eternal torment “precept” are sincere in their belief that it is taught in the Bible. Therefore, let us examine the Word of God in order to ascertain what its testimony really is concerning the divine penalty for sin. The proper place to begin this examination is in the Book of Genesis, with its record of the creation and fall of man. We can be assured that whatever God there stated to be the penalty for transgressing his law has never been changed, for he is the same yesterday, today and forever.—Num. 23:19; Mal. 3:6; James 1:17

The first mention we have in the Bible of punishment for sin is in Genesis 2:16,17. This passage reads, “The LORD God commanded the man, saying, 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.” *Young’s Literal Translation* reads, “dying thou dost die,” meaning

that if Adam disobeyed, the dying process would immediately begin, and he would finally succumb and return to the dust from which he was taken.

God explained very clearly what the penalty for sin would be, and there seems no good reason for misunderstanding his words. However, this is exactly what has happened, and various false teachings have resulted. Death, it is claimed, does not mean death as we know it, but eternal separation from God in a state of constant torment, often including the thought of literal fire and brimstone. By attaching these false meanings to the word death, the entire testimony of the Bible on this subject becomes confused and distorted.

For example, when a person is convinced that death means torment, Paul's statement in Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death," means that "the wages of sin is torment." When the apostle added that "the gift of God is eternal life," it means that the gift of God is escape from eternal torment. According to this distorted viewpoint there is no actual death. All must live eternally regardless of belief or unbelief, the difference being that the believer lives in heaven and the unbeliever in a hell of torment.

ORIGIN OF ERROR

The question naturally arises as to how such a misconception of plain words came about. The origin of this false tradition was in the Garden of Eden. While God said plainly to father Adam, "Thou shalt surely die," the serpent, "which is the Devil, and Satan," later said to mother Eve, "Ye shalt not surely die." (Rev. 20:2; Gen. 3:4) Here

was a denial of God's truth, a lie that has been responsible for many of the false teachings in the world from that day until now.

We are not told what Satan may have had in mind when he thus charged God with a falsehood. He may have imagined that he could thwart the divine purpose of inflicting the death penalty. If so, when he discovered that the human race was actually dying, he began his campaign of deception. This has seduced practically the whole world into believing that death is not what it really is, that actually there is no real cessation of life—"Ye shall not surely die."

Just as in ordinary human relations one lie leads to another, so it is in the realm of religion. Since it was claimed that death was not death, but merely the entrance into another state of eternal consciousness, a place of torment had to be conceived for the wicked. Thus the creed-makers allowed their imaginations to work very freely, deciding that God would surely want to eternally punish unbelievers.

We thank God, however, that this is not the teaching of the Bible. It is a "precept of men" by which those possessing zeal without knowledge have endeavored to frighten unbelievers into repentance. Indeed, the Scriptures do teach that there is a hell, but the hell of the Bible is not eternal torment, but the state of death. Hence, the united testimony of God's Word is that "the wages of sin is death."—Rom. 6:23

HELL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The original manuscripts of the Old Testament were written in the Hebrew language, and in them there is only one word which is translated "hell." It

is the Hebrew word *sheol*, which appears sixty-five times in the Old Testament, but it is not always translated “hell.” In the *King James Version*, it is rendered “grave” thirty-one times, and “pit” three times. In *Young’s Literal Translation*, *sheol* is left untranslated, always appearing in its Hebrew form.

How does the Bible define the Hebrew word *sheol*? Ecclesiastes 9:10 reads, “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave [*sheol*], whither thou goest.” Here are the words of the wise man, Solomon, one who wrote under the inspiration of God’s Holy Spirit, and he informs us that there is no work, knowledge nor wisdom in *sheol*. If language has any significance at all, this explanation means that *sheol*, the only “hell” of the Old Testament, is a state of complete unconsciousness.

The man Job evidently understood the matter in the same way. When he was suffering physical pain from head to foot, and being mentally tormented by his supposed comforters, who instead were accusing him falsely of gross sin, Job asked God to let him die and go to *sheol* where he could be at rest. Job said to God, “O that thou wouldest hide me in *sheol*, that thou wouldest keep me in secret, until thy wrath be past.”—Job 14:13

According to tradition, hell is a place where God visits his wrath upon sinners by means of cruel torment. Here in the Bible, however, we find a righteous servant of God asking that he be allowed to die and go to the Bible hell—*sheol*—in order to escape God’s wrath. How terribly the traditions

of men have distorted the truth of the Word of God.

The “wrath” of God mentioned here by Job is the penalty of death which rests upon the whole world of mankind. Incident to the carrying out of this penalty there is much suffering, and Job wanted to fall asleep in death until the time came in the plan of God when the penalty would be removed. He knew that in *sheol*, the Bible hell, there would be no pain.

The Hebrew word *sheol* is again used in Psalm 16:10. This is a prophecy of the death and resurrection of Jesus, in which we are assured that Jesus’ soul would not be left “in hell,”—*sheol*. On the Day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter quoted this prophecy, and in his quotation used the Greek word *hades* to translate the Hebrew word *sheol*. (Acts 2:25-28) From this we know that these two words have the same meaning.

Hades is the Greek word most frequently translated hell in the New Testament. It is used in Revelation 1:18, where Jesus informs us that he has “the keys of hell”—*hades*. It is also the Greek word used by Jesus when he spoke of “the gates of hell” which would not prevail against the church. (Matt. 16:18) *Hades* is used in Revelation 20:13, where we are informed that “hell” will give up its dead. In verse 14 of this same chapter we are assured that hell—*hades*—is to be destroyed, that it will be “cast into the lake of fire, ... the second death.” Tradition would have us believe that the lake of fire is hell, but according to this text, hell is destroyed in the “lake of fire,” fire being used here to symbolize destruction.

(Continued on page 36)

In Luke 16:19-31, we have Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus, in which the Greek word *hades* is again used. We are told in the parable that the rich man died, and that in *hades* he lifted "up his eyes, being in torments." The advocates of the torment tradition have seized upon this to prove their point. They insist that this is not a parable, but a literal statement of facts. However, the only thing in the parable they actually believe literally is the word "torments."

The torment tradition is associated with the belief that the righteous go to heaven when they die and the wicked go to hell. However, upon examining the parable, it does not say that the rich man was wicked. No advocate of the torment belief concludes that a person will be tormented forever simply because he was rich when he died, yet the parable says nothing more about this rich man than that he "fared sumptuously every day" and allowed beggars to eat the crumbs which fell from his table.

Similarly, the parable does not teach that the righteous go to heaven when they die. The beggar is not said to be righteous. No advocate of the eternal torment tradition believes that being a beggar automatically qualifies one for an eternity of bliss in heaven.

The parable, in fact, does not say that the beggar went to heaven. Instead, it declares that he was "carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom." We doubt if there has ever been an advocate of the torment theory who believed that at death a person is transported by angels into Abraham's bosom. Indeed, it could not be true, for Abraham's bosom decayed and returned to the dust thousands of years ago.

Additionally, no one has ever suggested that throughout the centuries there have been rich men in torment asking beggars in Abraham's bosom to send them a drop of water to cool their tongues. These details are not interpreted in a literal way by even the most ardent teachers of the torment theory. This parable is seized upon to teach this God-dishonoring tradition for the sole reason that it contains the word "torment." In order to make use of it in this way, it is taken completely out of its setting and given a meaning which Jesus never intended, nor taught.

We will not here discuss the meaning of all the details of this wonderful parable, referring the reader instead to our booklet, *The Truth About Hell*, a free copy of which will be sent to anyone who requests it. In brief, however, we understand that the rich man of this parable is symbolic of the Jewish nation, the riches of which consisted of the favors and blessings of God. The beggar, on the other hand, symbolized the Gentiles, who up until the time of Jesus did not enjoy the favor of God, although many were glad to partake of some of the "crumbs" of favor that fell from the rich man's "table."—Matt. 15:22-28

Shortly after Jesus uttered this parable, both of these symbolic men "died" to the position which they then occupied. Calamity came upon the Jewish polity, and the nation, as such, was destroyed. The position of the Gentiles also changed. No longer were the riches of God's favor withheld from them. Dying to this unfavorable situation, they were carried to Abraham's bosom. That is, they had the privilege by faith of becoming the children of Abraham, and of inheriting the promises which God made to him.—Acts 26:17,18; Gal. 3:13,14,28,29

With the change of Israel's status, these natural descendants of Abraham, formerly "rich," became a persecuted people. Throughout the centuries since, the fires of hatred and persecution have raged unrelentingly around them. While in *hades*, and therefore dead as a nation, as individuals they have suffered much, and time and again have appealed to the favored Gentiles for help, but mostly with little or no result.

This fire of persecution was foretold by God, through Moses, who said concerning the Israelites, "I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be: for they are a very froward generation, children in whom is no faith. They have moved me to jealousy ... and I will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation. For a fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell [*sheol, hades*], and shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains. I will heap mischief upon them; I will spend mine arrows upon them. They shall be burnt with hunger, and devoured with burning heat, and with bitter destruction."—Deut. 32:20-24

It is clear that the "fire" referred to in this prophecy is symbolic, not literal, for the Lord said, "They shall be burnt with hunger." When Jesus spoke in the parable of the rich man in *hades*, it is quite possible that he had this very prophecy in mind—that the troubles coming upon Israel would burn unto the "lowest hell," completely destroying them as a nation. Within a few years after Jesus uttered this prophetic parable, destructive trouble did come upon the nation. Their city and Temple were destroyed, and the people scattered to the far

corners of the earth. While, as a nation, Israel was in the oblivion of *hades* for more than nineteen hundred years, as a people they have suffered many torments of oppression and persecution.

It is also interesting to note in this connection that Jesus said nothing in the parable about the *hades* condition continuing for eternity. The prophecies foretold, and we are now witnesses, to the fact that Israel has been reborn as a nation in her own land, in preparation for the forthcoming kingdom of Christ, through which they will be blessed.—Rom. 11:25-28

GEHENNA FIRE

In some instances the word hell in the New Testament is a translation of the Greek word *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* was a deep ravine outside the walls of ancient Jerusalem. In the Old Testament it is referred to as the “valley of Hinnom.” (Josh. 15:8; 18:16) The Jews used it as the location for the detestable practice of human sacrifice. (Jer. 32:35) When God put an end to these abominations during the reign of righteous King Josiah, it became an area where the refuse of the city and carcasses of dead animals were destroyed in a continuously burning fire.—II Kings 23:10,28

Jesus used *Gehenna* as a symbol of the utter and lasting destruction of the willfully wicked. It is this Greek word that is translated hell in Matthew 10:28, which reads, “Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [*Gehenna*].” It is clear from this statement by Jesus that *Gehenna* symbolizes destruction, not torment. All agree to the reality of bodily death, and Jesus

speaks of the soul being killed, or destroyed, in the same manner.

The possibility of the soul, or being, living again after the body is destroyed is because there is to be a resurrection of the dead. Those who are to be awakened from death are spoken of in the Bible as merely being asleep. (John 11:11-14; Acts 7:59,60) In the coming kingdom, however, those who willfully oppose God and righteousness will be destroyed in the “second death,” represented by Jesus as the destruction of *Gehenna*—not only of the body, but of the very being, or soul.—Rev. 20:14,15; 21:8

The Greek word *Gehenna* is also used in Mark 9:47,48. This passage reads, “If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell [*Gehenna*] ... Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.” In searching the Scriptures for some proof of the torment precept, this statement has been seized upon, even though no mention of torment is made in these verses.

Here the proof given is Jesus’ reference to worms which do not die, and to unquenchable fire. The “worms,” it is claimed, are in reality the souls of the wicked, forgetting that in Matthew 10:28, as previously noted, Jesus states specifically that souls which are cast into *Gehenna* are killed, or destroyed. They do not remain alive.

If it were not for the torment dogma, which darkens the mind and distorts reason, no one would for a moment think that Jesus is teaching here that the wicked will physically suffer in *Gehenna* forever. As elsewhere, he is using *Gehenna* as a symbol of destruction, the worms being a reference to the

natural process by which dead carcasses are consumed. Worms, maggots, and similar creatures are ever present when decaying flesh is exposed to the elements.

Any fire that completely destroys that which it consumes is unquenchable. For example, when a building is burning and the fire cannot be extinguished, we could properly speak of it as an unquenchable fire. However, this “unquenchable fire” dies out and ceases to be when there is nothing more to consume. Thus we should not misuse expressions of this sort to prove that God will mercilessly torment sinners forever.

“THE GIFT OF GOD”

As we have seen, Paul wrote that “the wages of sin is death,” not torment. To this he added, “the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Rom. 6:23) Life and death are the two alternatives presented to us in the Word of God, not bliss in heaven or torment in hell. God warned Adam that death would be the penalty for disobedience, so when he disobeyed, he was sentenced to die. This plunged the whole race into death, because all have been born in a dying condition. “By man came death, ... in Adam all die,” wrote Paul.—I Cor. 15:21,22

The receiving of life through Christ will be by means of a “resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.” (Acts 24:15) Consecrated believers in this age are reckoned “just” by faith, and it is in the “first resurrection” that they will be rewarded with actual life—immortality for those who prove to be faithful followers of the Master. These will live and reign with Christ and, during the thousand years of his kingdom, will be associated with him in dispensing

the blessings of life to “all families of the earth.”—Rev. 20:6; Gen. 12:3; 22:18; Gal. 3:29

The general resurrection of all the dead—“unjust” in Adam—is described in Revelation 20:13 as a deliverance from hell, or *hades*. When Jesus died as the world’s Redeemer he purchased, as it were, the “keys of hell,” and he will use these keys to set death’s captives free. After his resurrection Jesus said, “I am he that liveth and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.”—Rev. 1:18; Isa. 61:1

Presently, all of earth’s billions, under Adamic condemnation, are either dead or dying. These can be blessed with life only by being raised from the dead. Jesus assured us that this would be accomplished, that the “gates of hell” would not forever hold death’s prisoners, that he, who has the “keys,” together with his true followers, will throw open the “gates.” It will be then that hell will give up its dead.

This does not mean that all mankind is assured of enjoying everlasting life. It means only that all will be released from the sentence of death that was entered against Adam and his children. Released from this, they will be given an opportunity as individuals, under favorable and righteous conditions, to obey God’s law and live forever. Those, few in number we believe, who willfully choose not to obey will be destroyed from among the people. (Acts 3:23) The vast majority, however, will gladly obey, and thus hear the words, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” (Matt. 25:34) Then all the “precepts” and traditions of men which have engendered fear will be forever overthrown. ■