

Myths About Hell

Curtis Dickinson

“Full well do you reject the Word of God that you may keep your own tradition” - Jesus, Mark 7:9.

Many who find the traditional idea of endless punishment inconsistent with God’s justice go to the other extreme of universalism: the belief that everyone will finally be saved. The good news is that there is a third alternative found throughout scripture that says that unrepentant sinners will be punished by final death, while only the redeemed will be granted life and immortality.

In refuting the idea of universalism many resort to commonly held beliefs which, although deeply imbedded in tradition, are contrary to the truth found in the Bible.

IMMORTAL SOULS. At the root of the argument for unending punishment is the myth that every person possesses an immortal soul, which, as one writer put it, “requires an eternal destiny from which there is no escape.” This is to say that God doesn’t have the power to destroy that which He creates.

There are two things wrong with this teaching. First, man does not possess a soul; he is a soul. “And God formed man of the dust of the earth, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being (soul)” (Gen. 2:7). The word soul appears four hundred and fifty times in the KJ version of the Old Testament. It is translated from the Hebrew word “nephesh,” which all the lexicons render as “animal life” or “living being.” In the OT the word “soul” is used in reference to the whole person.

In the New Testament there are over fifty occurrences of the word soul, a translation of the Greek word “psyche,” which connotes living persons with conscious being. When Luke wrote that “two hundred and three score and six souls” were in the ship with Paul (Acts 27:37), he was referring to people.

In the words of Professor Howard Hayes, “The prevalent notion that soul is a mysterious, ineffable, immortal something which man has or possesses rather than something he is has corrupted Christian thought and speech. For example...it is commonplace for people to speak of ‘saving souls’ in an evangelistic effort as though they were interested in saving something apart from the person in view” (Questioning a Tradition. Unpublished manuscript). There are numerous errors that stem from this religious tradition.

The other problem with the immortal soul idea is simply that nothing about man is immortal. God’s first warning was to Adam and Eve concerning disobedience, saying, “Thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:17). It was Satan, whom Jesus called a murderer and a liar (John 8:44), who contradicted God and said, “Thou shalt not surely die” (Gen. 3:4). Throughout the Bible there are reminders of man’s mortality. Jesus emphasized the fact that eternal life is conditional; it is granted on condition of one’s positive response to him. He never promised eternal life or immortality to unbelievers, but warned that they would lose their lives.

The word “immortal” occurs only once in the KJ version (1 Tim. 1:17), and that is a mistranslation of a word that means “incorruptible.” The word “immortality,” from “athanasian,” is used three times in the New Testament. Paul wrote that only God has immortality (1 Tim. 6:16). The other two occurrences are 1 Corinthians 15:53, 54 where it is stated: “This mortal shall put on immortality.” Clearly Paul teaches that in this life man is mortal, but in the resurrection those who are the children of God will “put on” immortality. Since God alone is immortal, the only way for anyone else to have immortality is for it to be bestowed. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” This “golden text” says it all, that eternal life is for the believers, and all others are to perish.

GOD THE JUDGE. The doctrine of endless punishment, when truly believed and understood in all its horrors, is almost too much for the human mind. It says that Almighty God will keep billions of human beings alive only for the purpose of having them tormented endlessly, with never any possibility of repentance or deliverance. At the same time it says that we are to love such a God and worship Him in spirit and in truth. Some go so far as to say that such unending misery of billions of people will bring eternal glory to God.

Many who hold to the doctrine of unending punishment recognize how inconsistent it is with the character of God, and try to remove such inconsistency by saying that God does not send anyone to hell; they send themselves there. Since man desires God to leave them alone, in the end that’s what He does, and leaves them alone for eternity. They define hell as being separated from God for eternity. Of course, they do not cite any scripture for this idea, for instead of saying that God will leave the sinner alone, scriptures expressly states that God will judge the world through Jesus the Lord (Acts 17:31) and that it is He who has the power to destroy the entire person (Matt. 10:28). Paul wrote that, according to the righteous judgment of God, those who refuse to obey the gospel of Jesus will “suffer the punishment of eternal destruction” (2 Thes. 1:5-9).

Peter wrote that the present heavens and earth “have been stored with fire, being reserved against the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (2 Peter 3:7). This storing with fire, the judgment, and the destruction of the ungodly are all under God’s power and by His direction, not man’s.

GEHENNA FIRE. Another myth confounds the simple expression of Jesus about the unquenchable fire of Gehenna (Mark 9:44, 48). Some go so far as to intentionally misquote his words to read “the fire that never shall be quenched.”

There is a vast difference in saying that a fire is “unquenchable” and saying the it “never shall be quenched.” There are Biblical examples of fires that were said to be unquenchable, but eventually went out when they had consumed the material that burned, such as Jeremiah 17:27, Isaiah 34:10, and Ezekiel 20:47, 48. All of these speak of “unquenchable” fires that God used to destroy certain things. They could not be quenched, but, needless to say, after all was burned up, the fires went out.

When Jesus spoke of Gehenna (rendered “hell” in the Authorized Version), he was talking about the city dump of Jerusalem, in the Valley of Hinnom, where the refuse was dumped and burned and thus destroyed. This refuse consisted of garbage, waste material, bodies of dead animals and sometimes the body of a criminal. One thing is certain: Gehenna was not a place for the living. The fire that burned there was never quenched because its purpose was to consume all that was cast into it. However, there is no fire now burning in that valley south of Jerusalem. It burned out centuries ago and the garbage dump no longer exists in that place.

Those who heard Jesus speak knew exactly what he meant: that the unrepentant sinner would be put to death and destroyed like the garbage cast into Gehenna. That final fire, which in Revelation is called the lake of fire, will be such that no one can quench it; therefore it will be an unquenchable fire. But that doesn’t mean that it will burn forever. To use Jesus’ expression about unquenchable fire to prove an everlasting place for sinner to live and suffer endlessly is inexcusable.

THE DEVIL IN HELL. People speak of “the devil in hell,” or “the devil’s hell,” as if Satan had a place of residence called Hell. There is no suggestion in the Bible that such is the case. In Revelation it is said that the devil will be cast into the lake of fire, but this will be only after judgment, and, as mentioned above, the purpose of the fire is to destroy that which is cast into it. In the KJ version both the Hebrew word “sheol” and the Greek word “aidos” are rendered as hell. The word hell is derived from an Indo-European word “khel” that means to hide or conceal. From it we get “helmet,” “hull,” “hall,” and finally “hell.” Both “hall” and “hell” were originally “concealed or covered places.” (Dictionary of Word Origins, Little Brown & Company). “Sheol” and “aidos” actually refer to the grave, or place of the dead, for both saint and sinner, and are translated as grave or Hades, except in the KJ version. The word has nothing to do with the punishment of sinners or the devil or demons or with any life at all.

The good news is that Jesus paid the believer’s penalty for sin as he “bare our sins in his body upon the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). He did not suffer endless punishment, but satisfied the law that says, “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23) when he “poured out his soul unto death” (Isa. 53:12).

These popular myths about hell not only confuse the clear and sublime message of the gospel of Christ, but also dishonor God, create doubt and fear where there should be peace and joy, and provide fertile soil where doubt and skepticism may grow.

Traditions contrary to God’s word should be abandoned.

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