

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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HOW SHALL YOU ESCAPE THE SENTENCE OF HELL (2)

Matthew 23:33

This lesson is the second part of a teaching on hell. We concluded our last lesson by looking at three biblical expressions related to hell: (1) 'the weeping and gnashing of teeth,' (2) 'the fire of hell,' and (3) 'the outer darkness.' We mentioned that though the imagery is different, all these expressions involve the idea of death. The 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' is the reaction of a person before his execution. When you are in the fire of hell, you are consumed. You die. When you are cast out into the outer darkness, you are cut off from God's life. You die.

A place of destruction

This brings us to another expression concerning death and destruction. This is what Jesus said in Matthew 10:28.

Matthew 10:28. And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

Hell is a place of destruction, a place where God can destroy body and soul. The word 'destroy' is very important. Here 'to destroy' is the translation of the Greek word *apollumi*. *Apollumi* comes from *ollumi* which means 'to cause to perish,' 'to bring to nought,' 'to destroy.' The addition of *apo* indicates that the destruction is total. Therefore *apollumi* is stronger than the simple *ollumi*. In reference to objects, it means that something is lost for good. In reference to a person, it means that the life of this person is completely lost. He perishes. He dies, never to be seen again.

'Don't be afraid,' Jesus said, 'of those who can just kill the body. But be afraid of God who, because of justice, can utterly destroy both body and soul in hell.' Man can only kill the body. But God's ability to destroy has no limit. It reaches deeper than the physical and further than the present age. He can put an end to the existence of your body and of your soul, forever.

I repeat again. Hell is a place of destruction. It is not just a place of suffering. Some people have this image of hell where God make sinners suffer forever. Yes, there is suffering, but it is primarily a place of destruction.

Concerning this question of suffering in hell, I don't think that God needs to inflict much suffering. Most of the suffering will come from within the person. If you are that person, you will inflict suffering upon yourself when you realize how a fool you have been. God gave you life. The path of life was opened to you through the blood of His Son. He opened the gates of the kingdom. But you did not want to enter. And now you are sitting in hell. You came to your senses and you see the

truth of the whole matter. You realize your whole foolishness in throwing away life. 'What have I done to myself? I could have had life!' But now, it's too late. There, in hell, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth from the realization that you have lived like a fool. The torture will come from within yourself, and not so much from God. You will suffer for as long as you survive in hell. And then, destruction will come.

There is a debate among Christians about the fate of those who go to hell. Some Christians believe that people who reject God will experience conscious torment in hell for eternity. That is the traditional view. Other Christians think that the unbelievers will experience a limited period of conscious punishment and then will cease to exist. After hearing me say that hell is a place of destruction, you can already guess that I prefer the second view, that after a period of suffering in hell, the unfaithful will experience a complete extinguishing of existence. I will use this lesson to show why I think the 'annihilation' view is closer to the Scriptures. We will do a quick survey of the NT on this matter.

The teaching of Jesus

Let's begin with the words of Christ. Jesus constantly warned people about the terrible consequences of refusing God's gift of salvation. Refusal means condemnation and condemnation means destruction. We saw in the previous lesson that these people will be banished from God's presence forever to a place that Jesus compares to fire and to outer darkness.

Much of Jesus' teaching about the final punishment involves fire. The Lord said in Matthew 7:19, *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the **fire***. The fire of hell. And what will happen to evildoers in this fire? A few verses earlier, Jesus spoke of the few who find life and the many whose end is destruction (Matthew 7:13-14). The choice is in front of us: we either take the narrow road and we will live, or we take the broad road and we will be destroyed (... *the way is broad that leads to **destruction***). There is no notion of eternal life in torment or of suffering agony forever.

The Parable of Tares among Wheat (Matthew 13:24-30) speaks about weeds that are burned. In the story, the owner of a field allows wheat and weeds to grow together. At the harvest, he gives his workers the instruction to gather the wheat for storage in his barn. The weeds should be collected as well and burned. Jesus explains the parable in this way.

*Matthew 13:40. Therefore just as the tares are gathered up and **burned with fire**, so shall it be at the end of the age.*

41 The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness,

*42 and will cast them into the **furnace of fire**; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

At the end of the age, everything that causes sin and all who do evil will be thrown into the fiery furnace to be burned completely. Nothing will be left of them.

The same idea is repeated in the Parable of the Net (Matthew 13:47-50). The story is about a great fishnet that caught all kinds of fish. The good fish are kept and put in containers. The bad fish are thrown away. Jesus' interpretation of the parable is quite similar to the one concerning the Parable of Tares and Wheat. *So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will cast them into the **furnace of fire**; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth* (Matthew 13:49-50).

The story of Daniel's three friends tells us what a fiery furnace is intended to do (Daniel 3). Anything that is put in there is consumed until nothing is left. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were

supposed to be destroyed by the fire of Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. But it did not happen. God miraculously intervened to save their lives. However, on the day of judgment, no one will be delivered out of God's fiery furnace. Body and soul will be destroyed in hell. There will never be restoration, resurrection or recovery.

John the Baptist also used the imagery of fire to speak about hell. *The ax is already at the root of the trees,* John said in Matthew 3, *'and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into **the fire** ... His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable **fire*** (Matthew 3:10, 12). Unfruitful trees are burned, as are useless weeds and bad fish. For Jesus and for John, these images represent evildoers. Their fate is the same in each case: they will be burned up by God's unquenchable fire. It is unquenchable in the sense that it keeps burning, reducing to nothing whatever is put in it.

The book of Revelation

In the book of Revelation, John also uses an expression involving fire. He does not use the word 'gehenna.' He talks about the 'lake of fire.' It is found 5x in Revelation. Two characters called the beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 19:20; 20:10). Death and hades are also thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14)

The first time human beings are mentioned as being thrown in the lake of fire is in Revelation 20:15: *And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into **the lake of fire**.*

The second time is in Revelation 21:7-8: *He who overcomes shall inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the **lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.*** Here John contrasts the destiny of the one 'who overcomes' with that of the lost, who will be in the lake of fire. What is the lake of fire? John tells us here: it is the second death. The lake of fire is the place of the second death.

And what is the second death? It is the final death. The first death is the death of the body. The second death is the death of the soul. Remember Jesus' words in Matthew 10:28: God can destroy body (first death) and soul (second death) in hell.

All human beings, the saved as well as the lost, will experience physical death. But that is not the end of the story. There will be a time of resurrection when both groups will be raised. God will change the body of the saved from mortal into immortal. They will never die again. On the other hand, the wicked will not be given immortality. They will definitively perish in the second death.

The letters of Paul

Paul wrote a great deal about the final punishment. He does not mention hell or fire. His language tends to be more direct. For example, twice he warns us that sin results in death. In Romans 6:21, he has this question: 'What benefit do you get from the things you are now ashamed of? The outcome of those sinful things is death.' Two verses later, he concludes his thoughts with this well-known sentence: *For the wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23)... Death is the inevitable punishment for sin.

In Romans 2:12, Paul specifically uses the word 'perish' to describe the final punishment of the sinners. At the end of the world, sinners will perish, whether they are Gentiles or Jews. *All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by*

the law. Here the Greek word for 'perish' is *apollumi*, the same word that Jesus used in Matthew 10:28 about 'destroying body and soul in hell.' In Paul's writings, it is also used to describe Israel's destruction in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:9-10) and the fate of dead Christians if Christ had not been raised (1 Corinthians 15:17-18). So for Paul, death means perishing. It means being destroyed. In his mind, there is no future life of any kind for the lost.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:9, we find Paul's statement that the wicked will *suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord*. We pointed out in the last lesson that the concept of hell is closely linked with the concept of justice. Hell is a necessity in a universe where justice is to be maintained. The fact that this destruction is a 'punishment' indicates that it is the result of a lawful process in accordance with what is right, with the whole notion of justice. Notice that the expression 'suffer the punishment' (*dike*) implies a judicial decision. It comes from the same root word as does the word 'just' (*dikaios*) in v. 6 et and the word 'retribution' (*ekdikesis*) in v. 8.

Notice also the words 'eternal destruction,' the punishment of eternal destruction. Some have used this expression to argue that in hell sinners will live and linger on in destruction forever. It will be a sort of undying death. Sinners are destroyed, yet not really destroyed. You see the difficulty of this interpretation. We have here a contradiction. Either you are destroyed, and so you will at some point cease to exist, or you are not destroyed, and therefore you will exist forever. If you exist forever, it means you cannot be destroyed.

How then is this destruction 'eternal'? I would like to suggest that the term 'eternal' makes more sense when it is applied to the result, and not to the process. The result is everlasting. 'Eternal destruction' means that when something is destroyed, it is destroyed in a permanent sense. It will never exist again. If I burn up a piece of paper, I can say that I have eternally destroyed that paper because it will never exist again. In all eternity, we will never see it again. That is the meaning of the expression. Once it is destroyed, it is gone forever.

The rest of the NT

The author to the Hebrews warns believers who do not produce the fruit of salvation that *land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned* (Hebrews 6:8). The land represents 'worthless' Christians who claim to know Christ but who bear no fruit. They will finally be burned, i.e. destroyed. In Hebrews 10:39, the author specifically uses the word 'destroyed': *But we are not of those who shrink back and are **destroyed**, but of those who have faith and keep their souls*. There is a drawing back which is a fatal and a final one. It leads to destruction.

In the book of James, in James 4:12, we read this statement: *There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able **to save and to destroy** (apollumi); but who are you who judge your neighbor?* Since God gave the law, only He has the ability to determine the eternal fate of each person. There are only two alternatives: salvation or destruction.

Three other times James talks about the end of sinners. One time, he uses the word 'slaughter'. *You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of **slaughter*** (James 5:5). And twice he says it is 'death.' James 1:15: *Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth **death***. James 5:20: *Let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from **death** and cover a multitude of sins*. The salvation in view here is salvation from the second death. Nowhere do we find the idea of an everlasting torment.

In his second epistle, Peter speaks about scoffers who will conclude that 'everything goes on as it has since the beginning' and will therefore ridicule God's warning of coming judgment (2 Peter 3:4-9). Peter gives them a warning. The people who experienced the flood had the same opinion, yet

their world was destroyed at God's command (2 Peter 3:6). *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). This means that the fire which will melt the elements will also bring about the destruction of the ungodly. Peter uses the same verb (destroy / *apollumi*) and noun (destruction / *apoleia*) to describe both the end of the old world in Noah's day and the future end of ungodly men.

Jude 7 declares that Sodom and Gomorrah serve as an example of what is going to happen to the wicked. *Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example, in undergoing the punishment of **eternal fire***. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah defines 'eternal fire.' It is a fire that exterminates sinners and annihilates their sinful way of life once and for all. Peter also mentions that God condemned these cities *by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter* (2Peter 2:6). When you reduce something to ashes, it means that it is destroyed totally and forever.

Conclusion

Many Christians believe that God has made the soul indestructible and that unrepentant sinners will end up in hell to suffer agony and pain for all eternity. According to this view, the wages of sin is not death, but eternal life in torment. In this lesson, we saw that this view is not consistent with many passages of the NT.

How can God, who so loved the world that He gave His only Son to die for our sins (John 3:16), also keep all the ungodly alive in hell in endless torment? A man sins for 100 years and he spends the eternity in hell? How can that be justice? If you sin for 100 years and you suffer for 100 years as punishment, at least there is some form of justice that I can understand. But if you sin for 100 years and you are punished to stay in hell forever, that cannot be justice. There is just too much disproportion between the crime and the punishment to believe that it comes from a fair judgment.

There will be degrees of punishment in hell, and the justice process will allow plenty of opportunity for that. But whatever suffering may be involved, ultimately, the unrighteous will be all eliminated.

Remember the wonderful words of our Lord Jesus in John 3:16: *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him (a) should not perish (apollumi), (b) but have eternal life*. At the end, there are only two options: to enjoy eternal life or to perish.