

RETHINKING HELL

Imagine you're watching a criminal trial on television.

This guy's a bad one. I mean, really bad! He's charged with committing a terrorist act that resulted in numerous deaths, and there is no doubt that he's the one that did it. You feel a sense of satisfaction, don't you, just knowing this guy will pay for his crime?

As you watch, the moment everyone's been waiting for arrives.

The judge enters the courtroom. Everyone stands.

Silence.

The judge reaches for his gavel. With an air of authority, he smacks the block sharply three times, calling the court to order.

The spectators take their seats.

You're riveted as uniformed guards lead the felon into the courtroom. As you see his face, you feel, again, a legitimate satisfaction that he will be punished for what he did.

Suspense builds as the judge stands to announce the sentence. "This is it! Come on judge, give it to him."

"I hereby sentence the defendant to 20 years . . . of torture!"

What!

Torture?

Now how do you feel?

What just happened to your sense of satisfaction at justice being served?

It's gone, isn't it?

And why is it gone?

Well, because your sense of justice can never be satisfied with torture. The two things are completely at odds. You know in the bedrock of your being that inflicting torture on a person, no matter what they've done, is fundamentally wrong.

RETHINKING HELL CONTINUED

OK, so far, so good. It is perfectly rational to categorize torture as evil.

But then we're faced with a massive disconnect, because the popular Christian doctrine of hell comes along and asks us to believe that God does the very thing we know to be evil: He tortures people for all eternity.

Now just in case we've forgotten how serious this idea is, how about a quote from the famous Jonathan Edwards sermon, Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God?

"It would be dreadful," he preached, "to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God for one moment; but you must suffer it for all eternity."

Then he goes graphic:

"... a boundless duration before you ..."

"... you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance ..."

"... you must wear out long ages ..."

"... conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance ..."

"... and then ... when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a moment to what remains, so that your punishment will indeed be infinite."

Wow!

This reads like Edgar Allan Poe horror. But no, it's popular Christian doctrine.

Conscious beings burning alive forever!

It's difficult to imagine a more horrifying idea.

And it's even more difficult to imagine a God of love doing this to people.

But is this what the Bible really teaches?

Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." So what happens to those who do not have everlasting life? They will "perish," not live in perpetual agony.

The apostle Paul says, "the wages of sin is death," not eternal torment.

James says that "sin, when it is finished, brings forth death," not eternal life writhing in flames.

The last book of the Bible, Revelation, tells us that God will finally make "a new heavens and a new earth" in which "there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying," and "no more pain," which could not be said if, in reality, billions of lost souls are "crying" out in "pain" as they undergo endless tortured.

And think about it, what would heaven be like for the redeemed knowing that just over yonder, somewhere in God's universe, people are being tortured?!

The prophet Malachi says to the redeemed that all evil people will be "ashes under the soles of your feet."

The apostle Paul says, "the wages of sin is death," not eternal torment.

RETHINKING HELL CONTINUED

Ashes!

Ezekiel goes so far as to quote God saying to Satan, the author of evil, "I will bring forth a fire from your midst . . . and never shall you be anymore." The Devil himself will cease to exist rather than suffer forever.

So the Bible teaches that all who are incorrigibly evil will be justly and mercifully destroyed and cease to exist. That's Hell, according to the Bible.

Now granted, there are a few verses that speak of Hell in terms of "eternal fire." But the same Bible describes "Sodom and Gomorrah suffering the vengeance of eternal fire." Then the Bible speaks of that same eternal fire "turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes" and bringing "them to destruction."

So when the Bible speaks of "eternal fire," it means forever in effect, not in duration. The fire will be eternal in its outcome, which is destruction. That's how the Bible plainly defines "eternal fire," and this fits perfectly with all the other verses that say evil people will be burned to ashes. No good lawyer would accept the testimony of 3 complex witnesses over 100 clear witnesses.

Bottom line: if God meets our most basic definition of justice and goodness, it's inconceivable that torturing people would figure into His character. We would regard as unjust, and downright evil, any "justice" system that would employ torture as a punishment, and then we turn around and expect people to love and worship a God we claim does just that. It's not surprising that so many people find it impossible to believe in God when this is the picture painted for them.

Thankfully, we don't need to believe it.

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