

Is Hell Burning?

*"When it comes to a literal fire, I don't preach it because I'm not sure about it."*¹ -Billy Graham, 1993

"According to a recent Gallup poll, 60 percent of Americans believe in Hell or say they do, up from 52 percent in 1953."² Whatever people believe Hell to be, a majority of people in this country believe Hell exists. If we accept the Bible as the Word of God, then Hell is a reality. The question is, what is that reality?

If we have a vaguely uncomfortable feeling about thinking of billions of the unsaved spending an eternity in a place of torment, perhaps it would be of comfort to know that God actually does have a just and reasonable plan for man. We do not have to rationalize our comfortable lives by telling ourselves that Christian missionaries are conquering continents of sinners. For if we tried, the fact that Islam is today's fastest growing religion would indeed be a bitter fact to swallow. In any case, how can a loving and just God allow for a burning hell—such a concept is contrary to His character?!

The Scriptures say that death, not torment, is the penalty for sin. "In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17). "The soul that sinneth it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4). But since the "father of lies," Satan, contradicted God, "Ye shall not surely die" (Genesis 3:4), he had to devise a cover-up to hide the fact that the human race was actually dying. Throughout human history Satan has been very successful in perpetuating the lie that man does not really die but lives on in an afterlife—one of bliss or torment. So the world's religions have all carried on Satan's lie in one form or another until our day.

The idea of an individual trial for the soul may have come from the ancient Egyptians or from the teachings of Zoroaster who taught that a "Lord of Lies" who lived in a "hell" in the dark reaches under the earth recorded the deeds of men as debits and credits. When the body died, the soul went to be judged (remember Satan's first lie). If the "soul" is found in the "black," it is permitted to proceed to the House of Song. However, if the "soul" is found in the "red," it is doomed to hell. Furthermore, the eastern religions of Hinduism and Buddhism both teach of many hells to which the soul must continuously migrate.

Since Satan is the originator of the lie, "Thou shalt not surely die," and all the ancient religions perpetuated this myth, how does the Bible define Hell? Can we find support for the common conception of Hell—one filled with fire and torment?

Two principal places in the Bible which mention fire and hell together—occur in Deuteronomy 32 and Luke 16. Remarkably both these passages deal with the subject of Israel's "death" as a nation and the exaltation of the Gentiles to God's favor.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

The plot of the story that Jesus tells is simple. A poor man sits outside the house of a rich man begging for crumbs. When both these men die, they are taken to different places. Being tormented with flames in hell, the rich man calls out to the poor man, who has been brought to Abraham's bosom. The rich man begs for "water" but cannot be comforted because of the "great gulf fixed" between them. Is Jesus relating the experiences of real people? Does an existence of torment await those rich in this world's goods? Are the poor automatically promised an afterlife of bliss and comfort?

When Jesus taught, how did he speak to the people? "All these things spoke Jesus unto the multitude in parables, and without a parable spoke he not unto them" (Matthew 13:34). Unless Jesus was instructing his disciples in specific codes of conduct (Luke 16:18, Matt 18:15-22), he would only use parables to teach his message. Parables can be recognized by their narrative, story-like quality. Parables are often difficult to understand. Once, the Disciples asked Jesus about the meaning of a parable he had told that day. But Jesus first explained, "Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but unto those who are outside all these things are done in parables...." This story of the rich man and Lazarus is a parable which contains an important lesson to the Pharisees who were listening (vs. 14), but probably didn't understand.

In parables, groups of people are represented by different symbols. To represent his faithful servants, our Lord used the symbol of "wise virgins" in the Matthew 25 parable. In this parable, the rich man represents a favored class—the leadership of the nation of Israel. The Apostle Paul speaks of this rich favor, "What advantage then hath a Jew?... Much in every way, chiefly because unto them were committed the oracles of God" (Romans 3:1,2).

Being "clothed in purple and fine linen" the rich man certainly represented royalty. Purple is the color of kings! To Moses God promised in Exodus 19:5,6, "Now therefore, if ye will obey My voice...ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation." The "fine linen" signifies the righteous purity accounted to the Israelites because of the sacrifices of the Law.

Clearly, our rich man clothed in purple and fine linen represents the richly favored status of the Scribes and Pharisees, the spiritual leaders and representatives of Israel. If the rich man represents a favored class, then Lazarus must also be interpreted as a class—a downtrodden people. The beggar class consists of the publicans and sinners of Israel and Gentiles seeking the truth and favor of the Lord. Sitting outside the favor of God, this sin-sick class begged for some little crumb of favor. For example when the woman from Canaan, a Syro-Phoenician, sought Jesus to free her daughter from possession, Jesus first ignored the woman. Then he said, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." When she persisted Jesus explained to her, "It is not meet to take the children's bread and to cast it to dogs [identifying the heathen as dogs]." The woman replied, "Truth Lord: yet dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table." Jesus replied by giving a crumb of favor to this unfavored Gentile.

In our parable, we learn that eventually both Lazarus and the rich man die. How did the Gentiles and Jews die? Their death represents an end of their status as favored and unfavored. They did not die literally because we know that the condition of death is a state of oblivion: a state of nothing. "For there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest" (Ecclesiastes 9:10). But the Gentiles did not literally go to heaven because Jesus was the first to ascend to the Father (John 3:13). The Gentiles were grafted into the Abrahamic promise (Genesis 22:17,18; Romans 11) The Lazarus class is "brought nigh" through faith in the Lord Jesus. "That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:12-14).

Martin Luther provides a sensible interpretation of "Abraham's bosom." He states, "By Abraham's bosom we understand to be meant the Abrahamic covenant." (Genesis 22:16). God's covenant with Abraham promised his seed would "bless all the families of the earth." Expounding on that promise, Paul says, "And if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29). The Gentiles were brought to Abraham's "bosom"-a place of intimate favor with God!

Israel, on the other hand, was rejected from God's favor and thus "died" as a nation (viz. lost its polity). During the time the Gentiles were being invited into the kingdom of God, the nation of Israel experienced the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 A.D. and the beginning of their Diaspora or dispersion all over the world.

And so the rich man class, Israel, represented in its leadership "dies"-loses favor-after it rejects the crucified Lord (Acts 3:13-17). The favor shifts to the Lazarus class and the nation of Israel finds herself being hunted and persecuted. Israel, the rich man class is well described as "tormented." Throughout the ages the Jews have indeed cried out for comfort, but have received none because of the "great gulf fixed," separating them from any relief or favor.

A Great Gulf Fixed

What does this "great gulf fixed" signify? The word "fixed" seems to indicate that the gulf is a pre-determined or pre-established barrier prohibiting the Christians from giving comfort to the tormented Jews. Would this barrier last forever? No. Our Lord in Isaiah 40:1,2, commands, "Comfort ye, comfort ye My People, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins." This "warfare" refers to a time of difficult struggle and persecution. Eventually the warfare and torment comes to an end. In fact, Israel's restoration is represented as gathering the "dry bones" of the nation of Israel "out of your graves [to] bring you into the land of Israel" (Ezekiel 37:11-14). Their blindness would be removed and sins forgiven (Romans 11:25-27).

Moses' Prophetic Song

Looking at the one other place in the Bible where hell is in the same context as fire or flame (Deuteronomy 32:15-22), we find actually a song that is parallel to the Rich Man and Lazarus Parable. The rich man of the parable is referred to as "Jeshurun" in Deuteronomy. Jesus based his parable on this song (see Deut. 31:30) about Jeshurun and may have combined it with a contemporary story (described in an article, "Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades" attributed to Josephus). He created a parable to teach the lesson of the Jewish Scribes and Pharisees losing their favor to the humbler class and eventually to the Gentiles. Both stories have one favored and one disfavored who trade places. Though the poor man has the name Lazarus in our Lord's parable, in Deuteronomy, the poor man is equal to "those which are not a people" (vs. 21).

Songs are more often written in a symbolic language, deep with meaning. If we study the context of the word "fire" in verse 22, we find that this fire refers back to the jealousy of God in verse 21. God's anger burned hot against all the evil His nation has committed. Hell is defined as destroying the Jewish nation, "I would scatter them into corners, I would make the remembrance of them to cease from among men" (vs. 26). The fire burning is symbolic of God's jealousy destroying Israel as a nation. This song is not about a literal fire burning in hell.

Is the Rich Man in a Fiery Hell?

Fire represents destruction. The Christian's faith is "tried with fire." (1 Peter 1:7) Literal fire—no. What is destroyed? The dross of human-mindedness is destroyed so that the Christian's faith may be as pure "gold." The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus does not teach a fiery hell, but a nation destroyed and a people scattered and suffering. Even Hell [Gk. hades] itself will not last forever. When "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave [hades] where is thy victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:55) If we believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we also have to believe that Hell will not forever be a penalty for Adam's sin. The highly symbolic Book of Revelation says "And death and Hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death [Gehenna]" (20:4) The dying condition of the race of man will end, plus all those in Hell (actually dead) will be released in the awakening. This will be the time of the death of death, the death of hell. No more will man die because of Adam's sin "Dying thou shalt die." Neither will Satan's lie be repeated. Satan will be destroyed. God's wonderful character will be vindicated and sincere Christians who struggle with the idea of a God who would permit an eternity of hell fire torment will be grateful to know the Bible does not teach it.

Endnotes

1. TIME, November 15, 1993.
2. Alice K. Turner, THE HISTORY OF HELL, Harcourt Brace & Company (New York: 1993), p.4.

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