

How Would It Have Been Expressed?

By John R. Gibson

Does the Bible teach there is a place of eternal torment where those who failed to do the will of the Father (Matthew 7:21) will spend eternity in a conscious state of suffering? Because it is such a horrific thing to visualize, we are tempted to explain hell as no more than a condition of missing out on the blessings of heaven. For more than a century there have been religious groups, including Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, which argued that there was no "after death torment" for the wicked, but that they simply ceased to exist. The movie *Hell and Mr. Fudge* showed how Edward Fudge, a Limestone County native who once preached for several churches of Christ in this area, came to reject the idea of eternal torment. In more recent years there have been those in evangelical circles who have explained hell as little more than missing out on the glories of being with God in eternity.

In this article, I don't intend to examine every argument that has been made against the idea of eternal punishment, nor will I consider every passage that could be used to support the concept of a place of conscious existence where the unrighteous suffer. Instead, I want to ask the question, if there were a place of eternal punishment and God had wanted to convey that idea to us, how would it have been expressed any differently? As you read the following verses, just ask yourself what the intended message was. I believe most would agree that they often contain figurative language, but figurative language is intended to convey an idea, to paint a picture, and we need to be honest about the concept these seek to convey.

"And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Matthew 8:11-12

"Therefore, as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." Matthew 13:40-42

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." Matthew 13:47-50

"If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire." Matthew 18:8-9

"Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels':...And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Matthew 25:41, 46

"And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire—where

'Their worm does not die And the fire is not quenched.' " Mark 9:47-48

"But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who 'will render to each one according to his deeds': eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on

every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good....” Romans 2:5-10

“For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Any-one who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. And again, ‘The Lord will judge His people.’ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Hebrews 10:26-31

“Then a third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark on his forehead or on his hand, he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.’ ” Revelation 14:9-11

The fate of the disobedient is described as “weeping/wailing and gnashing of teeth;” “everlasting fire;” “everlasting punishment;” “the fire is not quenched;” “tribulation and anguish;” “fiery indignation;” a punishment worse than death without mercy; being “tormented with fire and brimstone...forever and ever.” If these Scriptures do not teach a place of conscious existence where the unrighteous suffer, I ask again, how could it have been expressed differently so as to convey that idea?

All quotations from the New King James Version, copyright 1994 by Thomas Nelson Publishers