

Reading the Bible Through Jesus' Eyes pt.3

God's Love Versus Punishment

1. Let's review. For the last 2000 years, there have been three major ideas about what happens to those who are evil or those who just never heard the Name of Jesus when they die. Infernalists, Annihilationists, and Universalists.
2. Universalists do not believe in automatic cleansing and that all are admitted to heaven upon their death...at least none that I've ever heard of. They believe that souls will be cleansed with a punishment that is remedial, not punishment for eternity. And, like those with other theological ideas, they have a lot of scriptures to back up what they believe.
3. For example, God says to unrighteous nations "Depart from me into everlasting fire" (literally, "age lasting"). BUT, He also says that ALL nations will be blessed through Abraham and that ALL will be made right with the Lord. (Genesis 12:3; Psalms 62:12; 67:4; 145:21; Matthew 25:41,46)
4. Universalists say that all of God's punishments must be understood in the light of His redeeming love, His will ("not willing that any shall perish but that all should come to repentance"), and His character. We see this in the OT time and again. Even after punishing Israel many times over, He always comes back to them and gives them another opportunity to walk with Him. (Genesis 12:3; Romans 4:13; Hebrews 6:17; James 2:13). Mercy triumphs over judgment. In Adam, all died but, in Christ, all shall be made alive but each in their own order (1st Cor. 15:22; Romans 5:18). The Lord, universalists say, will not cast anyone away forever (Lamentations 3:31-32; Hebrews 13:8).
5. He who taught us to love and forgive our enemies will surely do the same to His. All tongues will confess Jesus and all with rejoice in Him, though some may need to be "seasoned with fire" (Matthew 5:17; Mark 9:42-49, Acts 3:21). Eventually, ALL mankind will praise God (Psalm 22:27-28; 64:4-9; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).

6. When David prophesied that Israel's stumbling would be forever (Psalm 62:22), Paul said that it was not (Romans 11, especially vv. 9-12). Paul says that Israel's fall meant the reconciliation of the world to God. He further says that Israel will be like one raised from the dead because the first (Israel) is still considered holy by God. His character ensures their salvation, even if it be through fire.
7. Now, there are other views of the afterlife that do not include the salvation of every person but also deny that hell is an eternal torture pit into which the vast majority of mankind will be tossed to suffer eons and eons without end. We call these views Conditional and Annihilationist. They, too, have scriptures which seem to plainly back up their beliefs.
8. What each of these groups repeatedly remind us of is that Jesus said that punishment is not a one size fits all. Remember Luke 12:47-48. Those who were purposefully evil would be "cut off" (v.46). After finding the Essene writings in the Dead Sea scrolls, we know that that expression meant to "cut away from our presence." The greatest punishment God can inflict is to excommunicate you. Since every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father," to be separated from the source of every single good, pleasant, kind, sweet and peaceful thing is a horror to terrible to contemplate.
9. But look again: in Luke 12, Jesus said that some just disobeyed. They weren't evil; they just didn't do what they were supposed to do or they broke some rules. Some of them knew they broke the rules while others did not. All will be punished, but the punishment varies with the crime, shall we say. That seems much more equitable, much more like justice.
10. As far as I can tell, every commentator agrees that Jesus was speaking of the fate of the wicked at the end of the world. Then how can we square this with the teaching we inherited from the Roman Catholic Church that divides everyone into just two categories: eternal punishment or eternal joy? I have posed this question to some in my own tribe and in other tribes that teach this doctrine of binary outcomes and the answers can be truly bizarre. One told me that the fire for some will be hotter than it is for others. Another, several in fact, told me that those who knew they had a chance to come to

Jesus will suffer more emotionally than those who never had the chance.

11. "Never had the chance"? Do you hear yourself?
12. Dr. Fudge and other annihilationists made me step back and think again. When I go back and read all the arguments I used to use for making hell a place where people were conscious and in torment for eternity, it astounds me that I could have missed a very obvious point: when the Bible says "the smoke of their torment goes up forever" and "of their torment there is no end" there is no compelling reason to assume that that refers to individuals. Let me explain. Most of us have been told that the whole concept of Gehenna comes from a constantly smoldering, terrible garbage pit outside of Jerusalem. It was always on fire; it HAD to be to consume the garbage produced by the population of Jerusalem. The only problem is there is no history or literature to back up that idea.
13. When Jesus referred to Gehenna he was most likely referring back to the days of Jeremiah where that prophet wrote of the coming judgment upon Israel. They were doomed, in part, because they allowed children to be sacrificed to idols in Gehenna (and burning was probably a part of that ritual). That was the image used by Jesus and the apostles to describe the punishment of the wicked. So far, so good, but let's think a moment here. While the fire was eternal and while the smell and horror was eternal, each individual body was not. Jesus wasn't intimating that a tragically sacrificed body tossed into the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna) in the time of Jeremiah was still on fire and perishing hundreds of years later. The rebellion of Israel had continued, though, so Jesus warned them of Gehenna and reminded them of the judgment of God.
14. The burning goes on. What is burned does not.
15. As Greg England, Edward Fudge, and Leroy Garrett have said, eternal life comes only from God. It is a gift only He can give. If He chooses to withhold that gift, you cease to exist. You are gone. This is often called the annihilationist position. How do the universalists deal with this? They hold a variety of positions, but the main one is that even the most evil will eventually turn -- after a time in hell -- and

repent, confessing Christ (as in Philippians 2 where we are told every knee will bow and every tongue confess). Luke 12 indicates, however, that some are so rebellious as to be "cut off" from God; i.e. they will have their life taken from them. They will be erased.

16. Others believe that the evil or ignorant (of Jesus, the law, or a doctrine important to God) will first face punishment and will then be offered life with God if they repent. Those who refuse will be cut off forever. They will cease to exist. Others teach that not all of the evil or ignorant will go into hell even for a moment. Instead, they will merely be taken to witness what is happening to the devil and his angels and given the chance to repent or join the fallen.
17. But why is hell eternal if its denizens aren't? Because hell was created, the scripture says, for the devil and his angels. THEY are spiritual beings made of eternal stuff. They don't die.
18. God says He is a God of love and I believe it. Jesus said he did not come into the world to condemn the world, but to save it. I believe him. The love of God is greater than we could ever imagine...but to help us "get" it, He sent His Son.

Starting next week, a new series that looks at exactly what Jesus did for us on the cross and three days later.