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A Miserable Doctrine

"Something to Think About" Series. Article by Steve Jones



For much of my life, I believed that God was going to torture the majority of the human race forever and ever. It was the most miserable doctrine I was called upon to accept. But accept it I did. It was a part of evangelical orthodoxy. I did not want to be deemed a "cultist" or "ultra-liberal." The dogma of endless

torment was not optional in the Christian circles to which I belonged. It was sound doctrine.

I hated the doctrine, sound as I may have esteemed it. People I knew, people I loved, were going to a place of excruciating pain—a chamber of horrors. They were never coming out. All but a comparative handful would be spared that ghastly damnation that would carry mankind's groans and shrieks into the ages of eternity.

What puzzled me was the cavalier attitude with which many Christians held the doctrine. They accepted it as if there were no difficulty whatsoever. They seemed confident that they could enjoy life here and hereafter knowing that their aunts and

uncles and cousins-even their children-might be destined to thrash about in tormenting flames, world without end.

Some even said that it would add something to God's glory. It would magnify His law and His justice. Somehow this only compounded the problem for me.

The problem with the heathen was intolerable at times. I could only imagine the horror of an elderly woman in a Tibetan village, never exposed to the gospel. She would close her eyes in death and open them in the confusion of a fiery inferno. There she would spend trillions upon trillions of millennia, with no hope of escape. The remotest prospect of relief would be denied her from the God whom Scripture says is "full of compassion and tender mercies."

Some authors even express indignation that anyone would be troubled with such things. In a booklet on the doctrine of election, A. W. Pink mentions the consternation accompanying endless torment, then attributes it to "the carnal mind." Carnal mind! To recoil from a teaching that makes God torturer of His creation-or most of it is a product of the carnal mind? I suppose, by inference, the most spiritual minds of all should delight in the doctrine.

About eight years ago, I pulled an old, neglected book off the shelf of the Calvin College library. It was Proof Texts of

Endless Punishment, Examined and Explained by D. P. Livermore, an old Unitarian. It helped lift my burden. It raised new questions about final punishment, biblical questions. It was a ray of hope in the deepest theological gloom.

That ray turned to a burst of light that dispelled the blackness of endless torment. I took my Nave's Topical Bible and looked up all the passages under the heading, "Wicked, Punishment of." To my amazement, very, very few texts even remotely suggested a punishment like the traditional hell.

Nearly all the texts conveyed a judgment terminating in cessation of being. The wicked will be destroyed, cut off, killed and consumed. The Scriptures, with striking consistency, anticipate their utter extinction.

One startling discovery was the use of "everlasting burnings" in Isaiah 33:14. Here I saw that the eternal fire of divine judgment does the very thing traditionalists say it will never do-devour the wicked. It does not torment and keep alive.

After reading Edward Fudge's book The Fire That Consumes, I was convinced that strong evidence exists for "annihilationism," a teaching I had been taught to disdain as heresy. What a joy it was to discard the harsh, miserable teaching of eternal torment.

If you wish to study this further please contact me or go to

<http://www.mindspring.com/~anthonybuzzard/articles.htm> or <http://www.comingkingdom.org/ATCmag.html>