

The Purifying Fire and Salt of God based on Mark 9:42-50, David Jahnke, 8/2/15

I was tempted to skip over this passage in Mark as Hell is a difficult subject for all of us. It has troubled me personally since I was sent home at 9 years old with tracts so that my parents could get saved and I would not have to spend eternity separated from them, knowing they were suffering. So my view on this matter should comfort some of you who have questioned traditional views of Hell. It will challenge others who hold that traditional view. I want everyone to know that I think the Bible presents different images and possibilities about this and until everything is revealed, only God knows.

My first point is an obvious one—that many aspects of our gospel passage are not to be taken literally. If we did so, we would be chopping off limbs and tearing out eyes and putting millstones around people's necks and throwing them into the sea. Because our bodies cause us to stumble. And because we cause others to stumble.

Now what about Hell? Should this be taken literally? We have to first understand what Jesus is referring to. The word translated Hell is Gehenna and it was a literal place; it was a trash dump on the outskirts of Jerusalem where a fire was always burning.

Later Jesus quotes Isaiah who speaks of God remaking the heavens and the earth and how all mankind will come and bow before God; those who rebelled against God and refused Life would be outside the city of God, dead ...piled up in a place where the worm never dies and the fire never quenched.

So Gehenna or Hell was a place where refuse was dumped and where the corpses of the godless would rot and be burned at the end of time. This is quite different from the usual picture of Hell.

A Methodist colleague of mine posted 10 lies that fundamentalism teaches. I questioned the quote-unquote "lie" that punishment is a form of love. It is true that punishment which only degrades and hurts and torments is not a form of Love. But it is love if God punishes or disciplines for the sake of turning us from evil and destruction and toward life.

So the question before us is whether the punishment of Hell is eternal pain and degradation? This is one biblical possibility. But does it fit the overall biblical picture of God and Jesus and their love and compassion and justice?

I had some stomach cramps this week. I struggled to endure it for an hour or two. So imagine this and other pains times 100 incessantly for all eternity. Would you allow this to happen to your children or grandchildren or siblings or nieces or nephews? Could you even wish this upon your enemies?

Even when I was 20 and rebellious and agnostic, I knew that no God of compassion and justice would allow such unjust punitive measures. And there are other 20 and 40 and 60 –year olds wondering the same thing. How will we respond?

I think we should respond as Jesus did: “If you less than righteous parents know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” And even if they do not ask, God sends blessings upon the righteous and the unrighteous; God loves his friends *and his enemies* and calls us to do the same.

We should tell people that the Love of the God is sovereign over all of creation; not everywhere other than that place where billions are being tortured; that God is present whether we rise up into Heaven or make our bed in Sheol or Hell; that God’s Son entered into the Hell and Sin so that evil would be washed away, not to let it live on and torment a part of creation eternally.

I do not believe Sin and evil will carry on their wicked ways in some realm outside of God’s sovereign plan and purpose and presence. Following in the footsteps of the apostle Paul, I believe that sin and death have been conquered by Jesus and will, in the end, be completely destroyed.

Think of the difference these two ideas makes in the ears of the non-believer and those trapped in sin. The one rooted in mercy and the conquering of the horrors of sin engenders hope and confidence for them and their loved ones while the other provokes despair and fear and horror or scoffing and mockery.

So what then is the purpose of Hell? Jesus’ conclusion is critical. He says we all will be salted with fire and that salt is good and brings peace! This means that Hell is near just as the Kingdom of Heaven is and there is a life-giving purpose in the firey judgment and discipline and punishment of God. Hell is present to make clear the wages of sin and to make stark the two options always before us— life and death.

I have another episode of sauna confessions for you. The YMCA sauna is where much of my pastoral care and evangelism take place. I was going through my usual routine of pouring water on the sauna and praying that the fire of God's Spirit would cleanse my spirit as the steam does my body. This symbolizes the purpose of the purifying fire of God.

Another guy walked in and after a while I asked if it was o.k. if I poured water on the sauna. He was fine with that and as we dealt with the heat, we started talking. And he opened up about trying to get in shape and then moved into how he quit drinking 15 months ago and I told him I quit drinking too. And I told him why and he told me why...and it was a big why related to missing work and one night cheated on his wife all of which brought him to a point of being suicidal.

He had put himself through Hell and the final pit put two options before him— death or cutting out the stumbling block and new life. And he chose well. He sensed the light of God in the dark valley of death and he cut off the stumbling block. The fires of Hell were not there to torture him but to teach him and purify him. And life has blossomed around him the last fifteen months in ways that he never imagined.

I remember when I was new to the Christian faith how astonished I was to find myself powerfully sensing the presence of God shortly after committing a sin of some sort. I would feel miserable from the sin and that was for the sake of knowing the consequences of sin. But when the misery turned me to God, I would sense His presence in such a powerful way. And it was not a condemnatory or an excusing presence at all. It was a guiding and then a refreshing presence. I cannot guarantee that you will have similar experiences but whether you feel this or not, know it is true and turn to God and trust in his mercy and guidance.

One last illustration-- I was up at Overlook getting my allergy shot and a father held the door open for me as we were all leaving. As we walked down the hall, his toddler son's shorts were falling down and the dad mentioned this and said, "And he will fall down any second." And two seconds later... plop... he fell to the ground...and we all giggled. And the boy got up and looked at us giggling and smiling and started laughing too.

Our Father in Heaven knows that our pants are falling down and that there are things around and inside us that are going to make us stumble. And while God takes every stumble seriously enough to judge and correct it, God is not the Great and Everlasting Punisher in the sky. God is there to pick us up and smile down at us and get us laughing again.

He also wants us to know what's making us and others stumble and to cinch up our belts and cut those things out of our lives. He wants us to have friends who have been salted with fire like us and can help hold us accountable- friends to whom we can confess and who will speak the truth gently and with love and offer mercy to us. This brings peace and fellowship to our lives as sin is acknowledged, forgiven and gradually cut out of our lives.

Let us praise God through Paul's Words to the Romans:

O the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
For from God and through God and to God are all things.
To God be the glory for ever. And God's people say...Amen.

